

First Congregational Church of Royal Oak
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 10, 2021

First Reading: N/A
Gospel: Mark 10:17-31

“Today, scan the horizon for the builders, the lovers, the helpers, the healers – and allow them the precious bandwidth they deserve. John Pavlovitz

The Last Shall Be First

In the movie, Talladega Nights, Ricky Bobby (played by Will Ferrell) utters the phrase, “If you ain’t first, you’re last.” In real life, stock car driver, the late Dale Earnhardt Sr, is quoted as saying, “Second place is just the first loser.” In the world of sports, being first – being the best is the goal. Sports are a challenge of skill – with a bit of luck.

Let’s be honest, however. We as a society always celebrate the best, the richest, the most beautiful, the most talented, even the biggest church with the most people. And everyone is challenged to strive to achieve this supposed perfection. Having people feel poorly about themselves or their lives and then offering them something that will turn their life around – sells.

This mind-set can leave people struggling to see themselves as gifted and needed when they are just “average”. As if there is something wrong with being “average”. While those who attain this elusive goal of being the best struggle to maintain their perch at the top while others strive to push them off. It’s a vicious cycle when it is lived in everyday life.

The last shall be first. Somehow, I don’t think Jesus would think much of our constant clamoring to be the first and the best. Even in ancient Rome, having the most money and the most power was something to strive for in society and he wasn’t much enamored with it.

Those without money and power were easily disposed of as their lack of status was seen as reflecting their morality and character. Those who “had it all” were seen as being blest by God. It is the same heretical message being preached by our current prosperity preachers and it is as old as the world.

The young man in today’s Gospel would have been seen as being a righteous man who was blessed by God because of his wealth. Yes, he kept the commands and the law, but it was his wealth that proved his place in his world. Beyond losing all his wealth, giving away all he had to the poor also meant giving up his reputation and place of honor.

Besides, giving all these riches to the poor would then give them a dignity they had, in his opinion, not earned. They were not entitled to what he had earned. If they were poor, it meant God had not blessed them. Or did it? Jesus didn’t seem to see it that way.

The rich young man in the Gospel today also knows “the law”. He knows what it means to be a good Jew and he has followed all the rules. And yet even though he had everything going for him, something brings him to Jesus. And he seems to be sincere in his quest; not like those from last week who are trying to trip Jesus up. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Except we don’t “do” anything to get an inheritance. By its very nature, it is a gift that you cannot earn. Even if someone is hanging it over your head, an inheritance is given solely because of line of succession or blood relationship or, in our day, legal documentation. You cannot “do” anything to get it if someone chooses not to gift it to you.

If he is sincere, this young man simply wants to be right with God. He wants to follow the law as best he can. Now, the law of God is certainly a gift. It gives us the basic rules of what it means to become a faithful follower. However, laws can be manipulated and reflect an understanding of life that we have grown beyond. Just because something is legal doesn’t mean that it is moral. Slavery is a perfect example.

According to Jesus, all the law is governed by love – love of God and neighbor; whoever that neighbor may be. And it is telling that, even though the young man wants to be right with God, Jesus only quotes to him the commandments from the latter ½ of the list. The first ½ of the commandments deal with our relationship with God and Jesus only highlights for the young man, those which deal with our relationship with others. Quite possibly, Jesus already knows where the young man’s Achilles heel lies.

Just like last week, Jesus is turning upside down our understanding of being the first and the best. Our reputations and riches will not save us – in fact, they may very well become a stumbling block to living as disciples of Jesus. It would be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle – a small and narrow entranceway – than for a rich person to inherit the reign of God.

So, go, sell all you have – home, winter get-away 2nd home, cottage, cars, boats, jet skis, dissolve those 401Ks and retirement accounts. Give it all to the poor and follow Jesus. I have always found it enlightening that even people who read scripture literally usually can find a way to explain away this message. Jesus doesn’t leave us there, however.

Verse 27: *Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”* Even camels can get through the eye of a needle. Laws and riches and accolades do not define us. God defines us. And if we live with a sincere love of God, which will be seen in how we love our neighbor, then we will inherit all that God has in store for us.

It is my understanding of this story, that money is not the actual issue. It is our relationship with riches that is the issue. If money has become our idol, then we have already chosen that green god named George or Abraham or Benjamin over the God of Jesus to save us. It is that simple – and that challenging.

I began with a movie quote, and I am choosing to end with one. Jacob Marley in “A Christmas Carol” by Charles Dickens says to Scrooge; *“Business?! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my*

business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business! ”

We were created to belong one to another and if we truly do love God, we will see our wealth and reputations as a way to care for those pushed aside and treated as less than. The one who holds our heart will define our future – first or last. I pray it is the God of Jesus that holds your heart. Amen.