

Oct. 28, 2009  
Mark 10:17-31  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## The Good Life

When Ron, the girls and I moved from Phoenix back to Maine, I had a year to go through our things and decide what to bring with us. I gave away carloads of things. I filled the dumpsters in the back alley many times – with garbage and with recycling. I thought I had been brutal in my purging. Then when we opened up boxes here, I still found myself thinking, “Why did I transport *that* all across the country?”

Where did we all get so much stuff?

We have become such a consumer driven culture that we are now being consumed by our possessions and the time, money, and energy we devote to them. We have malls, malls and more malls to display the stuff we will buy. We have built bigger and bigger closets and garages to store all the stuff. And when that doesn't suffice we rent storage units to store the extras. Then, we have the dilemma of what happens to all these things when we are done with them. Our landfills are filling up quickly, often faster than was anticipated. I imagine the earth cries out, “How much, O Lord, how much!”

When we stop to think about it - as the financial turmoil of the last year has forced us to - we realize that many of us are overwhelmed by our stuff, no matter what age we are. Have you ever noticed how very young children at Christmas time are quickly overwhelmed by all the gifts? In reality they would really rather play with the boxes and the wrapping paper.

Teenagers, while desiring more things and often asking for them, indeed often recognize the entrapment of them. Preacher William Willimon reports that one college student with whom he was discussing today's lesson said poignantly, “I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all the bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff I don't think I could ever break free. But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise.” (day1.org, William Willimon, Oct. 11, 2009)

Adults don't have it much better. Studies show that our sense of happiness ironically goes down proportionally as our number of choices for purchasing things increases. Many older adults, nearing the end of life, find themselves trapped in their own homes, surrounded by a lifetime of things they can no longer manage.

Who is possessing what, and what is possessing whom? In the last year many people have been forced to come to a new reality with regards to possessions. Many people have lost their jobs,

their homes, their hopes and are simply focused on food and shelter day to day. A note of thanks to the Youth Group who raised \$233 dollars last weekend at their bake sale to give to MidCoast Hunger to aid those who are hungry.

Many other people have voluntarily been reevaluating their attitude toward possessions. In the newspaper a week ago there was the story of a family who made a commitment this past year to change their consumer behavior. In the effort to reduce their carbon footprint as much as possible, Colin Beaven and Michelle Conlin and their young daughter Isabella didn't buy anything disposable and didn't buy anything new. In the process they found themselves reflecting in new ways about what the good life really is.

In today's gospel lesson we encounter a man who is asking questions about the good life. He already has many possessions. He is also a religious man who follows the commandments. In other words, he is a good man. Sometimes we portray this man as arrogant, but that's not the way the story presents him. This good man runs to Jesus, kneels before him and asks him one of life's ultimate questions, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The man is a seeker. He is on a spiritual quest.

Even with everything that is good about his life, clearly he senses that something is missing. In Matthew's version of this story, he is described as young, but not here in Mark's gospel. Maybe this man has reached mid life and is reevaluating everything as people in midlife often do. The title of Rabbi Harold Kushner's book, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough: The Search for a Life That Matters*, expresses this man's struggle.

The famous 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist Carl Jung, toward the end of his career, said something quite remarkable. He said that he wasn't aware of a single one of his patients in the second half of their lives whose problem couldn't be solved by contact with what he called "the Numinous." (Letters, V.1, 1973, pg. 379) What we would call God.

This biblical man, possibly in the second half of his life, has sought out the Numinous One in Jesus. He senses that there is an answer in this Teacher. He asks Jesus a very big question. And Jesus lovingly (as the text says), yet piercingly, gives him a very big answer. Those of love us best, know us best. They can often see what we need, when we ourselves can't. The man asks Jesus a question about what needs to be added to his life. Jesus gives him an answer about what needs to be surrendered.

The man wants to know about inheriting eternal life. Like this man we typically think of eternal life as something yet to come, as something in the future, as a quality and possibility of life after death. But eternal means without beginning or end. It is life that is not tied to chronological time. It is life that is in tune with the Numinous One, even now. The Ten Commandments are not given to us so that we can spend our time racking up points on a get-in-free card for the pearly gates. They are given to us because of the quality of earthly life they create for us now if we follow them. They are given to us that we might taste eternal life in the here and now.

Jesus tells the man he needs to let go of his possessions. Possessions have the power to encumber us, literally and spiritually. How we manage our possessions is a spiritual matter. It is a spiritual matter that we need to help our children learn about from an early age. When our girls were little Ron and I worked with them to develop habits of giving away clothes and toys that were still in good shape but were not being used. Eventually they would just give us things and say, "This is for ICM," which was the church's agency that distributed such items. Just this morning before church two girls in the congregation came running up to me so excited about their haircuts. Now hair can be a very important possession to some members of the female population. Yet, they each had nine inches of haircut off yesterday to give to Wigs for Kids, for children who have lost their hair from chemotherapy. These girls have learned about giving to others.

Ultimately there is no way to soften Jesus' message to this particular man, although this is the only time he gives such a challenge in Mark's gospel. Jesus' disciples are dumfounded by his words that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. In their day it was supposed that wealth made possible the performance of religious duties, so in fact the wealthy were able to be more religious. It is not an irrelevant issue today. I know some people who were uncomfortable coming to church because they can't afford the right clothes. Yet, as is typical of Jesus, he turns perceptions upside down.

Jesus says that wealth is a profound spiritual challenge. One of the problems is that wealth is isolating and thus makes it difficult to engage fully in the realm of God, which is profoundly communal. The man asks how he, personally, can inherit eternal life, but Jesus calls him to be concerned about the eternal life, the good life, the life of his neighbor, as well. Jesus doesn't just tell the man to sell his goods and follow him. He tells the man to sell his goods and give to the poor. Jesus calls the man into relationship with others who need what he has. Most translations insert the words give "the money" to the poor, but the text doesn't say that. It simply says give to the poor, which I suspect means not only should he give his money but he should also give of himself. One of the profound dangers of wealth and of poverty is what it does to the experience of community. It separates people. Jesus calls the man to work at bridging that divide.

First Parish Church has been actively engaged in the last twenty five years in working to develop agencies and services in MidCoast Maine to help bridge that divide. Members of this congregation were involved in founding MidCoast Hunger, Tedford Housing, and Oasis Free Clinic. We were also involved in developing local chapters of such national groups as Hospice and Habitat for Humanity. And these are all ministries that we continue to support through contributions that some give directly to the agency and that we give collectively as a congregation. Yet, I have heard many of us say about ourselves that it is often easier for us to give money than it is for us to be engaged hands on in outreach ministries. Something to ponder.

Eternal life – the good life – life – are all intertwined images. It's not surprising that our images of heaven come from our experiences of the holy in the here and now. Someone I asked this question of the other day immediately said, "food, family, and friends." It's an image that

echoes the classic religious vision of a great heavenly banquet, a huge table laden with good foods, at which there is a chair for each person. I've read of this vision with an ironic twist – no one can bend their elbows. The question becomes is it a vision of hell, where everyone is bemoaning the fact that they can't get the food to their mouths, or is it a vision of heaven, where everyone is joyous and full because they are feeding each other?

To the good life!