

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL  
October 14, 2012

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

**"Just One More Thing"**  
Text- Mark 10: 17-31

In this morning's gospel, we encounter a rich young man with many possessions. Now, we talk about the Gospel as "Good News." In fact, that is exactly what Gospel means, "good news." I suspect, though, that when we listened to Marsha read today's text, "good news" was not what immediately sprang to our minds. This young rich man came to Jesus with a critical question--"what can I do to assure eternal life – that I will be part of God's realm?" He seemed to be a reasonable person – respectful as he knelt at Jesus' feet; sincere with his question, not just asking it to challenge Jesus and try to trip him up as others have done; faithful in following the Law all of his young life. Maybe he was a bit self-satisfied, a bit proud of his wealth and accomplishments. Maybe he even believed that his wealth was a sign of God's favor.

You and I have been there, haven't we? Think about that performance evaluation at work when it was a good year. You've worked hard – you can show that each of your goals and objectives has been met. You go in, hoping for a pat on the back, an expression from the boss as to how well you have done, how valuable you are to the company. You think you deserve the highest rating--a "10," an "exceeds expectation," a substantial raise or even a promotion. And instead, it is just ho-hum in the eyes of the boss, just what was expected. Or maybe it's that paper that you spent hours and hours researching and writing. You followed all the rules and are excited about getting the teacher's comments. Surely it will be an "A" or maybe even an "A+." But, no, it is a "B-," ordinary. Yes, it included all the required elements but it didn't soar.

Our rich young man was looking for a pat on the back. But one thing was sure – with all his wealth, he still was seeking something more. Something the wealth did not satisfy and that's why he came to Jesus. Probably hoping for just a small thing that would fill the void he was feeling. But instead, Jesus gave him a difficult – an impossible – task: sell everything you own, give it to the poor, and follow me.

It is hard to rationalize this away, my friends. No matter how we understand the Bible. This is one of the clearest statements of the Gospel call, of what it means to follow Jesus. For those who call themselves biblical literalists, it's about money and wealth – Jesus says to give it all away to the poor, not some of it, not a tithe of 10%, but all of it. (I wonder why more literalists are not doing so!)

For those of us whose understanding of the Bible is not literal but looks at Jesus' stories as

having more complex meanings that take into account the times in which they took place, the shock value does not go away. Maybe Jesus is not asking each one of us to throw ourselves and our families onto the welfare roles, but we are being called to examine our lives to see what attachments become obstacles between us and God. It may, indeed, be wealth—money or possessions; it may be the drive for success or prestige or power. It may be our attitudes, our values, our identity.

In this Bible story, we see that things haven't changed so much in 2,000 years. We want it both ways, as did the rich young man. We want what makes us comfortable, the things that are *of* the world and valued in our society, *and* we want to feel close to God and be assured of a place in God's realm. When we find out that it doesn't work that way, we, too, walk away in sadness—even if, deep down, we know that all of our "stuff" doesn't really satisfy, doesn't guarantee happiness or even safety.

How many times do we hear people say (and to be honest, I have heard myself say) "I just try to live the best life I can. I try to be kind to others and follow the Bible. That's all I can do." Far too often, I'm afraid, that is an excuse, a way of staying comfortable by not looking beyond our immediate surroundings and those of our own families and communities. It is easy to just follow the "checklist," the letter of the law. But in doing so, we miss the real point. When we do that, when we stay too close to the "rules" we limit our vision to only our particular way of understanding and in doing so risk hurting and excluding others. When we hold too tightly to our own values, our own identity, we take care of ourselves first. When we get too wrapped up in the endless loop of acquiring more stuff, more power, more success, we become careless about our world and its people. Continued success and growth come to mean ignoring the negative effects that growth might have on our environment or on people in other parts of the world.

Lest you think that this affects only individuals, it does not. It affects our churches, too—our local churches, our denominations, our theological group-ings like progressives, evangelicals, fundamentalists, emergents, and so on.

At the local church level, we tend to cling more tightly to our local stories and traditions than to the foundational stories and traditions of our faith. We indulge in nostalgia for a past that will not—cannot—come again. For things change. And we must change with them.

Hopefully by now you know that I value Grace's stories and history. But not as ends in themselves. I value them for how they have made this church and its people what and who they are. But also as the ingredients for an ever-evolving identity and direction that moves into new times and challenges while remaining faithful to the God who brought the church together in the first place. The God who urges us to put God first.

Not all of the stories and traditions, of course, point us forward. Some need to be fondly relegated to the albums and the files that will be used the next time there is a major anniversary. The trick is to discover which are which. And to have the insight and

courage to make difficult choices. Where in main-taining the things that we hold dear, does the time, energy, and money get in the way of doing God's work? Where do these things promote our own comfort, our own preferences rather than what God expects of us? How do we let go?

The rich young man came to Jesus seeking something more. Today, young people are still seeking but they are not coming to the church. Yet another survey was released this past week that showed a significant increase in the past five years in the number of those unaffiliated with a church or religion. This survey, by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life finds that they are *not* looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.

Yet, the findings show that the unaffiliated (or "nones") are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God. More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth, more than a third classify themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious", and one-in-five say they pray every day. In addition, most think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor.

These young people grew up in a time when the loudest voice of religion was the religious right.

And for some time, we have lamented that our more reasonable, more inclusive voices have not been heard. That if we can just get our message out there, these seekers will swarm to our doors. Perhaps our message is not visible enough in the way that we live our lives.

This is really a matter of stewardship. How is that? Jesus said to give everything to the poor, not to the church. Well, the possessions are not the point. The point is reorienting our lives to follow Jesus, letting go of all that stands in the way.

How might we re-examine how we live as individuals and as a community of faith? How can we engage in deep reflection about the obstacles that stand in the way of our living as people of God? Can we move out of our comfort zones, going beyond ourselves and sometimes letting go of what we want for the sake of others? We may be surprised. We may find ourselves not so much deprived of all of our "stuff" as liberated from it. As free to discover new ways of being God's people—ways that bring joys have not imagined.

I often wonder what happened to the rich, young man. I hope he came back. After he went away from Jesus grieving, to carry on with his life, I hope that he continued to feel that something was missing, that he needed to return to God. I hope that he remembered how Jesus looked at him with love, even as he walked away. Even as he decided that he couldn't do what Jesus asked of him.

Jesus used the image of a camel trying to pass through the eye of a needle. Ridiculous and impos-sible! It was hyperbole, but that is exactly what Jesus wanted – to show us how very impossible it is for us to love those worldly things and to follow him. And yet, there is good news here after all. Jesus looks at each of us with love. Even when we hesitate. When we can't quite let go. But, as impossible as it is to do as Jesus asks, it is always possible with God.

And that, my friends, is very Good News indeed.

Amen and amen.