

**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23) – Year B – October 11, 2009**

**Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31**

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Just over a week ago, a group of clergy gathered for the first time this fall for Fresh Start. Most of us hadn't seen each other for about six months, so the catching up was loud. While we were exploring cultural differences, our Latino friend was trying to explain to a group of wide-eyed Westerners how to accept a cookie gracefully, the Hispanic way. For this European at least, it seemed like an awful lot of negotiating for something you either want or don't want. Apparently, the idea is that it is polite to initially decline, even if you want the proffered cookie, and then to be generally and genially talked into accepting. As he explained, the point is to take every opportunity to get to know the other person, to extend the time of hospitality, and make a new friend. What do you think? It makes quite an interesting contrast to a yes, no, please and thank you kind of minimal interaction. Perhaps we should try it as our own first step to a new kind of hospitality, and a transformed future of deeper relationships with God and with others.

There is another first step experience in today's Gospel reading. The man, variously described in the other Gospels as rich and young, seems to have everything sewn up, at least as far as securing his comfort in this life is concerned. It is apparent that the kind of wealth he has accumulated would be mind boggling to the average Palestinian peasant, including Jesus. The man, who comes running to Jesus, may well be the Bill Gates of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Yet it is evident that there is something missing in his life of luxury. What is disturbing his mind is the question of possessing eternal life. You and I don't need to be Robert Plant or Jimmy Page to figure out that the rich man may well be trying to negotiate his own stairway to heaven. We don't have to be a game show host, to realize that the man is ready to make a deal, and like a high roller in a Vegas casino, he's talking strictly to the management to secure the best room in the house.

"Good Teacher, what must I do to *inherit* eternal life?" he asks Jesus. Having established that the man is serious, Jesus takes the time to point to some of the Ten Commandments, not casually, but with His usual care. Notice that each one named is especially relational, each one is about loving our neighbors as ourselves. Given the man's response, and his obvious wealth, it may have crossed Jesus' mind that he might be great at sticking to the letter of the law, but not quite so good at honoring the spirit of the law. It should also give *us* pause for thought. Whether we believe it or not, our own relative wealth in the vast desert of poverty that blows across the two-thirds world is huge. Personally speaking, I'd be quite happy if Jesus only focused on the rich young man trapped in the distance of time, and didn't turn His attention to my words and deeds; my silence and inaction; all the things that I've done, and failed to do, that have a less than desirable effect on *my* neighbors. How then do we deal with the fact that this is the living Word of God, and Jesus' words are the words of eternal life?

"What must I do to *possess* eternal life?" The question hangs in the air above the man's head like a cartoon caption. His posture is one of humility, but his words confront Jesus face-to-face in the picture of the scene before us. Can any of us truly know the depths of another's heart unless we are prepared to listen and to love them? For someone whose time on earth was so limited, it is amazing that Jesus has so much time for each individual that comes before him. Are you and I just as willing to take a few extra minutes to extend that moment of intimate hospitality? Jesus loves the man, completely and unconditionally. He loves the man so much that He **will** share the truth with him. Jesus identifies what the man might already know in the darkest corner of his heart. All bets are off now, the chips are down. The truth is about to be revealed. As Jesus speaks, all time and space collapses into this moment. We are standing right beside Jesus and the other disciples. We enter the scene in mindful awareness of our Lord's Presence, and find ourselves at the nexus of all eternity. You and I are about to bear witness to an essential and defining point in the history of salvation that echoes repeatedly, where a choice is made to accept - or decline - the proffered gift of God. All possibility for eternal life lies in faith by God's grace. In the company of all people, by our own efforts, we can never achieve what God so freely gives, and

what the man desires to possess.

For this man, for me and for you, this is ultimately a question of where our security lies, and what our relationship is to our wealth. We are stewards of all the resources and gifts that God has blessed us with, not owners. We are caretakers of God's generous gifts, with the concomitant power and responsibility. As disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, our behavior must reflect kingdom living. As we have already seen and heard, the attitudes of our hearts, and the way we live out our faith is very different to the world's ways. The world commends us for accumulating riches. God rewards us for treasure laid up in heaven by sharing, by using our money to build a more equitable and just world, which looks like God's kingdom. This week the world honored our President with the Nobel Peace Prize. Even in President Obama's words, it was not awarded for anything that he has yet done. Yet partially at least for his stated desire to work with other world leaders and peacemakers to increase the safety and security of the whole world through a process of eliminating nuclear weapons. What? Less weapons, more security? Isn't that rather like kingdom thinking, where the world's values are turned upside down to reveal God's values of peace and justice, love and equality.

It is astonishing how little time, space or cultural differences have changed the choices most of us will face in life. On a dusty road in the heat of the day, we are standing together alongside Jesus, almost breathless with anticipation, as we await the man's response to the word of truth. The revelation for this man is that he is tied to the world by his wealth. The stuff of this life has penetrated his heart, his soul, and his mind. The places where he might be filled with love for God and for neighbor are stuffed and stifled by desire for the treasures of the world. The man is bound like a prisoner in the sinister controlling power of his idolatrous passion for wealth. Does he know that what he possesses has now come to possess him? Do you and I?

Like the many demon-possessed who flocked to Jesus for healing and restoration to wholeness, the man *has* come. Jesus has named the demon, and offered the cure. He will not force the man to accept, but waits patiently for him to make his decision. It is a simple step to freedom for this man, and a simple step to accept the gift he seeks to earn for himself. Nonetheless, for the man it is a bitterly painful and hard deed to fulfill. If he truly wants to inherit eternal life, he must be freed from the grasp of worldly possessions. He must genuinely love his neighbors enough to share his wealth. As astonishing as it is in the eyes of the world, the man's riches hold no power to secure a deal with God. The scene now moves quickly before our eyes. No longer kneeling humbly, we watch the man stand, turn away from Jesus, and retrace his steps along the dusty road. His grief is palpable, he is still holding on tightly, yet filled with sadness. The question remains unanswered for us. What we do not know is whether this man's grief is because he has decided to accept Jesus' gift, or not. Either way, his grief alone tells us that he has heard Jesus' words. The contact made, and this new relationship with his Savior and ours is being extended, even as we watch the man take his first steps into an unknown future. It is in his grief that we can envisage a hopeful future for him, and all who meet the Word and are filled with sorrow. Grief is a deed of power, a gift from God. The process of grief can unlock our hearts to God's transforming love and grace. When we acknowledge our own grief and allow its power to work in us, we too can find the courage to stake everything we have and to release our grip on all things that give us a false sense of security in our earthly lives. You and I have then made room for God's kingdom, reaching out in faith and trust to accept the gift of eternal life.

Amen.