

“Difficult, but Not Impossible”

Mark 10:17-31, Proper 23-B, October 11, 2015

Some of you are old enough to remember with me a **Russian comedian that sought asylum in the United States of America in the early 1980s**. His English was very good, and listening to his voice became all the more tantalizing for some people because they actually enjoyed **his pronounced Russian accent**. The comedian’s name was **Yaakov Smirnoff** and in one of his standup comedy presentations he noted how greatly he was impressed when he walked into some of our **gigantic American “Supermarkets.”** Not only was there **ketchup for sale but actually five different brands of ketchup** for sale on the shelves there! But what intrigued him most was all of the **instant products** that were popularly placed on the shelves at that time. Listen to what he said: **“On my first shopping trip I saw powdered milk! You just add water and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice. You just add water and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder and I thought to myself: “Wow! What a country!”**

For any women present here this morning who may have brought a baby into this world, you might be thinking to yourself: **“If only it were that easy!”**

Life is seldom that easy. And I for one have always greatly appreciated the deep insight about life that a man named M. Scott Peck shared with us in a best-selling book he wrote, published in 1978 entitled: THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. The first sentence in his book is only three words: **“Life is difficult.”** He continues: **“This is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand accept it—then life is no longer difficult. But there are always those people who moan incessantly, noisily and subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens and their difficulties in this life as if life were generally easy. They voice their belief that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been visited upon them and upon their families and not upon others!”** Then Dr. Peck confesses: **“I know about this type of moaning, because I too have done my fair share of it!”**

In his book, Dr. Peck says that **parents actually do their children a great disservice when they raise them up believing that life is easy; because life is anything but easy.** But the more you learn to face the challenges of life head on, and accept responsibility, over time, the easier life becomes. **Yes, it is not always easy to pay attention when you are a student in the classroom.** It isn’t always easy to discipline yourself to do your homework and study for your tests, or pick up your room and help with household chores, **but it’s the only way we learn to embrace the difficulty of our existence as we grow older.**

The Bible is always very honest with us about the fact that life can be difficult too. In Job 4:1 we read, “Man, born of a woman, is but a few days old and already filled with trouble!” But we as Christians take special comfort in Jesus’ promise also: **“In the world you have much tribulation, but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world!”**

But the words of our Gospel lesson this morning present us with another great reality that we probably would never have recognized as being true for ourselves apart from Jesus’ divine revelation being given to us here: “How difficult it is for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God!”

The story is that of this young man that comes running up to Jesus in the words of our Gospel lesson today. He obviously has many wonderful qualities. It is **St. Mark** who tells us that he was a **“young” man.** It is **St. Matthew** who tells us that he was a **“rich” man.** And it is **St. Luke** who tells us

that he was some type of “ruler,” which may have meant that he was the captain of some sort of industry in his day.

He certainly was **eager to see Jesus** because Mark tells us that he came “**running**” up to Jesus that he might spend some time with him there! He certainly was blessed with a **spirit of “respectfulness” and humility** because he **kneels down** in Jesus’ presence. **But what it was that actually motivated him to come to Jesus on that particular day we can’t absolutely say for sure!**

Some say that even though he had so many blessing poured out upon him in this life, **there was still an emptiness with him that none of earthly possessions could satisfy.** For all that he had, he still had not sense of security and hope for the future. And that’s how it is with the earthly gifts of money and material possessions in this life: **THE MORE YOU HAVE YOU WANT.** And yet the Bible tells us that there is an empty spot in every one of us that God alone with the gifts of his love and salvation can fulfill!

Or were there perhaps also some false assumptions that this young man had about himself that really needed correcting? When he asked Jesus: “**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**” he was **suspecting that Jesus would simply shower him with accolades of praise, saying: “You, young man, what do you have to do? Absolutely nothing, for if anyone were ever a shoe-in for heaven, it has to be you!”** Maybe he was hoping that Jesus would simply pat him on his back and send him on his merry way, but this was far from what actually happened to him that day.

I like the fact that **St. John tells us in his Gospel account in John 2:24-25** that no one ever had to tell Jesus what was in the heart or on the mind of another individual because he could simply look there and see. And perhaps Jesus saw even as this “rich, young ruler” was approaching him that in spite of all of his wonderful qualities—unfortunately some **FALSE PRIDE AND A SPIRIT OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS HAD UNFORTUNELY SOMEHOW FLOODED THEIR WAY INTO HIS SOUL.**

Yes, we can see his humility in that he kneels before Jesus! And we can detect a certain amount of **good-cultural-breeding** in this young man because he addresses Jesus very respectfully by saying: “**Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?**”

Right of the bat, however, Jesus has an initial, unexpected reaction to this young man’s seemingly harmless compliment: “**Good? Why do you call me good! For there is no one good but God himself!**”

And in Jesus asking this question, he was not saying that he was not good or that God was not good: but for all practical purposes this young man could only have known him at this point on the level of being a fellow human being, even though Jesus was an exciting new prophet, with a magnetic personality, with a wonderful new message and with eyes that literally gripped you when you spoke to him!

In asking this question Jesus was assuming once again his place under the law of God for the sake of all of us. Just as when John the Baptist protested against Jesus baptizing him, once the Holy Spirit had convinced him that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus overruled the Baptist’s objection by saying, “Let it be so for now in order to fulfill all righteousness!” Jesus was thereby taking his first public step to the cross where he would lay down his life as the very Lamb of God to take away all the sins of the world!

I know that very few of us were here last weekend to hear the Gospel lesson appointed for last Sunday, actually only 17 people who attended the Saturday 5:30 PM service, but Jesus has just had that

encounter with the disciples who were trying to shoo away those parents who were bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing. I love the way the KJV describes our Lord's reaction: ***"But when Jesus saw this he became indignant and said, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, forbid them not; for to such persons as these belongs the kingdom of God! Unless you receive the kingdom of God like a little child, you will never be able to enter it!'"***

And right here now following that profound observation of our Lord's is the prosecutor's powerful piece of evidence we might call: "Exhibit number one!"

So Jesus suggests that this young man examine his whole life in the light of God's commandments again, and Jesus even mentions a few of those commandments, "You know what the law says, you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor! Do not defraud. Honor our father and mother"

But this is when that young man nonchalantly replies to our Lord, ***"Teacher, all these I have kept since my youth!"*** And I love what St. Mark tells us about Jesus's reaction to that young man then: ***"And Jesus looking at him, loved him!"***

Jesus knew that this man may have thought he had kept the Ten Commandments perfectly but that he was mistaken, without a doubt, in his own self-assessment. If this were true then he would love God above all other things, the God who says: "You shall have no other gods before me!"

Therefore Jesus said, ***"You lack one thing, go and sell all your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven! And come and follow me!"***

In response to Jesus' words: ***"The young man became disheartened and went away sorrowful for he had great possessions!"*** And I like the way that the RSV translates this: "At this his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions!" which means that this man was now greatly in need of a facelift!

We don't know what his ultimate response was, though do we? Is it possible he went home and thought about Jesus' words and his encounter with Jesus that day and he came to realize that he had not kept the Ten Commandments perfectly; that he too repented of his sins and later came to believe on Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord?

But this is when Jesus makes a profound statement that greatly troubles his disciples: ***"How difficult it will be or those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 23)!*** Jesus disciples were greatly amazed, because all of their lives they had been taught that worldly wealth was a sign of God's great approval of other human beings!

Then Jesus said it once again: ***"How difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God, for I tell you it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it would be for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!"*** And certainly what a preposterously and absurd statement of Jesus that one was. Some have suggested that if Jesus were speaking to us in our 21st Century vernacular language today he might say: ***"How difficult it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God! Why it is easier for a Mercedes Benz to pass through the nightly deposit box at the Bank of America, than for a rich person to enter into heaven!"***

Why is it difficult?

(1) In part it's because our material possessions always have a great tendency to fix our hearts on this world. The more we have invested of ourselves in the things of this world, the

more difficult it becomes for us to think beyond it, or to ever even contemplate the thought of our one day leaving it!

I know of a man who went to the **Biltmore House in Asheville on a beautiful fall day**, when all the leaves were greatly in their full glory and blaze of color! After he saw that beautiful home and all the beautiful pieces of art, the lovely tapestries there, the ornate furnishings inside, he said to himself: **“These are the things that make it difficult for a man to die!**

Someone has said that money is a wonderful servant but a terrible master; **because there is always something about material wealth that makes us insatiable for more!**

(2) Secondly, if a person’s main interest is material possession it tends to make him believe that everything is available to him for a price. I remember J. R. Ewing saying in one of those old episodes of the TV program **“Dallas” that everything is for sale because people will part with most anything, if you offer them enough money for what you want.**

But all know that no matter how wealthy you are there are some greatly desired things that money can’t always buy. **The Beatles sang: “Can’t buy me love!”**

And even extremely wealthy people cannot buy their way out of a legal problem, if severe enough, no matter how much money that they have!

Nor can wealthy people buy their health back once it has been greatly compromised by illness and disease. Modern medical science can do so much to improve the quality of our lives, to help us recover from all sorts of otherwise hopeless conditions, but it can only do so much in confronting the grim reaper. St. Paul reminds us in I Cor. 15 that death is the last enemy to be faced by us all!

(3) Thirdly, Jesus knew that great material wealth is always the acid test of any person. For every one hundred persons who can withstand adversity, only one can properly learn how to handle prosperity.

You know when this rich, young ruler walked away from Jesus that day very disheartened and with his countenance downcast, I can’t help but wonder if some of the people present may have thought that Jesus just “blew it.” Jesus just lost the biggest giver in the church, by unnecessarily offending him.

But this wasn’t necessarily the prescription that Jesus gave to all of his followers. It’s true, he had some disciples who were so poor that all they owned literally were the shirts on their backs. But he had wealthy disciples too: Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus of Bethany, and how about Joseph of Arimathea himself, who owned that beautiful burial plot where he was hoping to be buried one day. Little did he know that when he gave it to his Lord following Jesus’ crucifixion, that Jesus would be returning it to three days later in his glorious resurrection from the dead! You remember how St. John tells us all of the grave clothes of Jesus were all neatly folded up, and even the napkin that had been wrapped around our Lord’s head, was all nice, and neat and tidy too!

Jesus didn’t tell Zacchaeus that he had to get rid of all his worldly possessions, though following his conversion he restored to those from whom he had stolen money, not two-fold as the book of Leviticus declared, but four-fold and in doing so now demonstrated that his heart belonged to the Lord Jesus indeed!

But Jesus loved this rich man, Jesus loved his disciples back then, both rich and poor, and Jesus still loves all of us too! And how do we know this: because for the third time now St. Mark is

about to tell us that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he knew full well he would suffer in payment for our sins, and all our acts of lovelessness and be raised again to new life on the third day too!

While the sad reality is that we all have a tendency to turn greatly away from our God, he has turned towards every one of us instead. God loves us as we are, but too much to simply leave us as we are. In the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, God himself comes among us and does the impossible!

Jesus wanted this rich, powerful, seemingly totally self-sufficient young man to become completely dependent upon him, to become completely dependent upon him as far as his hope for heaven and eternal salvation were concerned. But sometimes, when we realize the cost of discipleship we may be tempted to quit, thinking the cost is too high!

Years ago there was a commercial on television where a man sitting in the chair at a tattoo parlor wanting to express his love for his girlfriend named Donna was having her named tattooed on to his arm. Part way through the procedure he asks the artist how much the tattoo would cost. "Fifty dollars" the artist replies. But this is when the recipient of the tattoo being given to him expressed the sad fact that he only had \$30 dollars on him."

That's when the television camera cuts to the couple now walking away from the tattoo parlor. Donna is storming off and the guy is walking briskly down the street after her, yelling: "I'll get it fixed!" when the camera zooms in on the man's arm which now read: "**I love Don!**"

There are times when life is very difficult. But it is especially during those times when we are grateful for the great faith that God has given us that he has not left us along in this world. That he is right here beside us, to minister to us, to strengthen and encourage us and to surround us at times with so many people willing to help us in our hour of need.

Psalm 46, "God is our refuge and strength!" Psalm 121, "I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? From the Lord who made heaven and earth!" In Isaiah 43, God says: "When you pass through the waters they will not overtake you; for I will be with you to deliver you says the Lord!"

Jesus said, "Behold I am with you always to the end of the age!"

Paul says, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to all the glory yet to be revealed to us!" And, "If God is for us who can be against us, for he who spared not his Son but gave him up freely for us all, how shall we not together with Christ, give us all good things!"

It's in the midst of those very trying and difficult days that we learn just how much our gracious God can be relied upon! Amen