

“Entering God’s Kingdom”

October 11, 2009

Scripture: Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

The Rev. William T. Hennessy

I’ve always found that to be a somewhat uncomfortable story to hear. A man comes to Jesus with a sincere question about eternal life and Jesus’ answer to him is more than he can bear. The confusion of the disciples is understandable. In a world where wealth and possessions are considered signs of God’s blessing and favor, for Jesus to tell this man he needs to let go of all of it makes no sense at all.

There are really more themes to explore in this story than can possibly be covered in one sermon. But at the heart of it, I think, is an understanding of what’s meant by eternal life and the kingdom of God. This man comes to Jesus looking for some kind of guarantee that he’s on the right path so that when he dies he’ll go to heaven. For him life and everything we do with it is all about the end.

And that’s not too uncommon. Very often the value of our faith has been presented as being about what happens to us when we die. That’s the main concern. Yet that doesn’t seem to be much of a concern for Jesus. In my reading of the gospels Jesus is more interested in the way we live right now. For him eternal life is something that we enter now and not after we die.

And when he looks at this man, who is so sincere in his question and his desire to be on the right path, Jesus offers him a way to enter God’s kingdom: “Go,” “Sell,” “Give,” “Come,” “Follow.” Those are the five instructions Jesus gives this man. They must have hit him like hammer blows.

And they may hit us in about the same way. We can tell ourselves that we aren’t really rich, so this doesn’t really have anything to do with us. But do a little exercise with me: Think about how much money you have access to right now; between cash in your wallets or purses and credit cards and debit cards many of us have access to thousands of dollars. Of course it wouldn’t be wise to liquidate all that, but the point is it’s there; it’s under our control.

And for most of us it would be unimaginable to give up that control. What would it feel like, for instance, if each of us were to hand our wallet or our purse to the people in front of us or down the row? How long could we be parted with that accessory? I would get very nervous if my wallet were missing.

I don’t bring this up to make anyone feel guilty. That’s not my point. And I don’t think Jesus was trying to make this man feel guilty about his possessions. The point is our attachment to things is very strong. We are especially guarded with our money. And entering God’s kingdom means letting go of those attachments. In fact it may not be so much a requirement, as if God’s kingdom had a gate fee. The very act of letting go

propels us into God's kingdom.

So really what we need to discern is how we let go. How do we give up our attachment to things?

I don't have a formula for that. I don't even think there is one. But I do believe letting go begins with acknowledging the hold the world has on us. The man who approached Jesus went away grieving because of that knowledge. But it doesn't have to be a source of grief. It could be the beginning of freedom.

When a person who is addicted begins to recover, the first step is admitting they are powerless over their addiction. Sometimes our anxiety over money is beyond our control. It's not that we want to do anything wrong with it; we're convinced that without it we can't survive. And there never seems to be enough of it to keep us secure.

Becoming free of that anxiety, free of that attachment, is the purpose of stewardship. We often think of stewardship as a fund-raising program. But actually it's a discipline. Stewardship is a way of living in the world with a grateful awareness of God's provision and a desire to reflect God's generosity. We have resources, time and abilities enough to accomplish everything we could ever want, and it's given to us by God's loving hand. So we can give it all away without fear of losing it because there is no end to God's giving.

After acknowledging our attachment, another step toward letting go is prayer. Now that may sound simplistic, but prayer is essential for remaining in communion with God. In fact, Paul talks about praying without ceasing. And when are we ever outside of communion with God? When are we ever beyond God's reach? Prayer is a way of recognizing our constant attachment to God. So our hope is to condition our spirits to be in a constant state of prayer so that everything we do is an act of worship.

A third step toward letting go is to live in community with one another. When Jesus answers the rich man, he's compelled by love to invite him to become part of the community of disciples. The man approached Jesus alone and he left Jesus alone. When we live with and for others our attachment to things is weakened. We cannot enter God's kingdom in isolation. We enter it as we engage one another, as we support and encourage and sustain one another.

So those are some steps toward letting go, but in reality it's a constant movement. We're always entering God's kingdom but never fully in it. How can we be when we are so enamored of the world? But just because that's so doesn't mean we should give up hope; it doesn't mean we should walk away grieving from Jesus' invitation. How hard it is to enter God's kingdom, and especially hard for those of us who are rich.

All we can do is try to let go. And in letting go be brought closer to God. And with God anything is possible.