

The Trouble With Jesus – Mark 10: 17-31
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska
October 11, 2009

He found me and chose to tell me why he was no longer coming to worship on Sunday. I never know what a person is going to say at those moments, and I have learned to brace myself for something that I am probably not going to like. After all, I have heard many reasons: “bunch of hypocrites,” “dull,” “unhelpful music,” but the one that has always amused me is “preacher, you don’t talk enough about Jesus.”

This man had another reason, one that was not foreign to most preachers, but I was completely confused because what he said did not resonate with me. “The reason I stopped coming to church is because I got tired of hearing you talk about money. Every Sunday, there you are once again talking about money. I want to hear about Jesus, not money.” I really was confused, because I thought I was always being careful to limit my money sermons to Stewardship Sundays and occasional other times when it was appropriate, like Week of Compassion Sunday. I was prepared to dig out my printed sermons and prove that what he said was not accurate.

Being confused, I asked for some examples of my “money talks.” “Every Sunday,” he said, “before the offering, you always talk about money and you try to be sneaky about it by cloaking it in a story. I don’t want to hear about money in Church, I want to hear about Jesus.” Well, I was guilty on that charge, because we do indeed take an offering every Sunday, but I certainly was not guilty of not talking about Jesus.

Are you aware that “money” was the second most addressed topic by Jesus? If you would go through the Gospels and count, you would find the only matter that Jesus talked about more than money is the coming Realm of God. It would be irresponsible for any preacher to ignore what Jesus gave enormous attention to. As a matter of honesty, any preacher would be remiss to not talk about the things Jesus talked about. However, there are people who don’t want to hear about that part of Jesus’ teachings or focus.

The late James McCord was the President of Princeton Theological Seminary. “McCord related a story about a Scots pastor who called on a delinquent member. The man said that he had been absent because when he attends church, all he hears is ‘give,

give, give.’ The thoughtful and reflective minister responded, ‘Well, I can not think of a better definition of Christianity than that.’” (Rev. Michael Lindvall, *Threading Needles with Camels*).

I find it interesting that a large segment of the Church dwells upon people’s sexuality, and are willing to change congregations that do not take what their perceived “right” stand is, when Jesus never said one word about such matters. I wonder how many of those same people prefer to hear nothing about economic justice, which Jesus spoke repeatedly about. It is interesting to notice what people believe about Jesus.

-A popular phrase that molds the Christian faith of some people is, “God helps those who help themselves”. In my years I have heard that quoted by many people. What is interesting is that it does not come from the Bible; it was written by Benjamin Franklin in Poor Richard’s Almanac. It is interesting what is claimed to be from Jesus and what is not. Jesus had a lot to say about money, and nothing to say about human sexuality.

A long time ago I read a story about a man who lived along the rugged coast of Maine. He loved to take his daily walks on the high cliffs and look out over the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. One day he was not giving the attention to his footing, and slipped when he came too close to the edge. He fell, but as good fortune would have it, he was able to do a last moment lunge and grasp a bush growing out from the cliff. It was a long way down and all he could do as he hung around was call for help. After a while a voice responded by saying: “this is God, let go and I will catch you.” He continued to hang on, and again the voice said, “this is God, let go and I will catch you.” It would not be much longer before the bush would tear away from the rocks, and with a last mighty effort he once again yelled, “is there anyone else up there who can help?”

Sometimes the people of the church are terribly selective about embracing the voice and message of God that they prefer to hear. It can be more comfortable to deal with the qualities of others which we dislike, than to deal with our own qualities that need to be challenged.

The Gospel tells us a stranger approached Jesus as Jesus began a journey. There is one thing obviously different about this man. It is clear that Jesus liked him and thought he would make a good disciple. This fellow is the kind of person that every

congregation would roll out a red carpet for. He never did anything wrong, and lived up to all the commandments that Moses brought down from the mountain. He did everything God required. To his great credit, he wanted to do more. He wanted to be more faithful, and then he asked Jesus what that might be. What he seemed to be most interested in was an abstract theological debate with Jesus, perhaps for reassurance of his proven goodness, but Jesus did not take the bait. We all know what Jesus tells him, “Get rid of everything you have. Give your wealth to the poor and follow me, be my disciple.” As we also know, he had a lot of wealth, and he was not about to give it away. Jesus went too far with this one. Jesus asked too much, and he lost what might have been an outstanding disciple.

Being a Christian is not about watering down the expectations of Jesus to meet our most comfortable level. Being a Christian is not about simplifying the gospel messages in order to find a niche that is non-threatening or unchallenging to where we are in life. Being a Christian is expensive, dangerous, and demanding, and Jesus was prepared to lose a good disciple rather than watering the message down to capture a great prospect.

I suspect in a generation or two historians are going to record this era of time in the United States as a time of “out of control greed.” When we sold our house in Maryland, the prices of houses in our location were growing by 15-20% a year. Our neighbors talked continuously about the increased value of the neighborhood houses, and people were counting their money. When we decided to sell, several neighbors expressed concern about our foolishness. “Don’t sell now,” they said, “you will lose money.” Within a month after selling our house, the air began to leak out of the housing bubble, and some of our old friends and neighbors wrote to us with the lament that they should have sold earlier. They held out because they became greedy. Money is not terrible - greed is terrible! I cannot recall once in the Gospels where Jesus condemned money or even wealth. What he was pointing a finger at was greed and the need to gather, gather, and gather, especially when others went hungry.

Two of the wealthiest people in the world are Americans, one who lives here in Omaha. What fascinates me about both of them is not their wealth but what they do with it. Both are giving it away beyond any precedent, to some of the most needy people in

our world. One of their goals is to eliminate polio in the world. This is contrary to the greed that has too often been exhibited by the wealthy people of the world. Wealth is not bad - greed is bad.

Some years ago Nancy and I stopped in Newport, RI and did a tour of the great houses of the industrial barons of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The excessiveness of the houses is nearly beyond description. As we walked through The Elms, the house of coal baron Edward Julius Berwind, I was in awe of the extravagance, and Nancy was quiet. "Isn't this incredible?" I asked her. With that she said, "I don't want to be here any more," and began walking toward the door. "Why?" I asked. She then said, "my grandfather was a coal miner in Michigan and he died of black lung disease, leaving my grandmother with six small children to raise by herself. I guess he helped to pay for this place and I don't feel good about being here." We left.

The problem with greed is that greedy hands and arms move in only one direction – they only draw in and never give out. Jesus said to the man, "if you really want to know what to do to inherit eternal life then here it is, give way instead of gathering in, and then you can follow me." The man turned away and went home.

Something I occasionally do is walk through a cemetery and read tombstones. Most of the recent stones (last 50 years) say little more than name and dates of life and death. Occasionally I find one of interest:

It is reported that in Thurmont, Maryland (where I served as pastor of the UCC congregation) there was an unusual tombstone. No one of the congregation knew of it, nor was I able to find it, but it is recorded that it reads: "*Here lay Owen Moore, Owing more than he can pay*" Another tombstone is reported to read: "*I told you I was sick.*"

In an old cemetery in Maryland I read a tombstone that read the man's name, then followed with a list of his parents' names, his wife's name and his children's names. I liked that one! What I have never seen on any tombstone is "died wealthy" or "lived in splendor."

Jesus used money to talk about character and qualities of people, from the widow who gave her mite, to the rich man that turned and walked away from Jesus' invitation to become a disciple because he had too much to give away.

This sounds terribly ominous, does it not? It sounds like there is no room in the world for wealthy people. If you are hearing that, then you are wrong. Wealth is not the problem - greed is the problem.

The Nobel Peace Prize is in the news with the prize being awarded to President Obama. Alfred Nobel is the man responsible for establishing the fund for the awards to be made. I don't know the size of the trust but it is huge. Did you know that Nobel was the inventor of dynamite? One day he read his premature obituary in a French newspaper. The obituary read:

“Le marchand de la mort est mort ("The merchant of death is dead") and went on to say, "Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday."

Nobel was stunned. He did not want history to remember him as “the merchant of death.” He turned his money into funding and finding ways for peace.

The most confusing part of Jesus' words to his disciples after the young rich man returned home was, *“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”* The “eye of the needle” is a portal of entry into the city. It is necessary to squat low to go through it. A camel could get through it, but it would be difficult.

There are many stories in the Scriptures of people with wealth who were above greed. One of my favorites is Lydia, the maker of purple, a wealthy businesswomen who almost single handedly saved the Church from early death by using her resources to keep it alive.

What Jesus said to his disciples is there is no absence of hope with God. Alfred Nobel was a camel that went through the eye of a needle. Yes, much is expected of us. Even when we see ourselves as hopeless, God does not.

The Trouble With Jesus is not that he asks too much of us. The trouble with Jesus is that he always holds out hope that we will be up to the tasks before us. It certainly would have been easier if he had said. “A camel will NEVER fit through the eye of a needle.” But no, he had to go and give us hope. Hope for each other and ourselves. Hope that perhaps things like greed can be a fleeting part of life. Hope that our hands and arms can be retrained to let go rather than gather in. Hope that we will treat each

other as God treats all of us. The Trouble With Jesus is that he thinks we can change. He certainly knows how to complicate our lives. Yes, it is obvious, that is The Trouble With Jesus. Amen.