

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 11, 2009
Pentecost 19
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 5:6-15
Psalm 90
Hebrews 3:1-6
Mark 10:17-31

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we are introduced to a rich young man who comes to Jesus with what is perhaps the \$64,000 question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*

We've been talking in recent weeks about how it is part of our human nature to approach problems or find solutions by seeking "bullet lists" or formulas. Go to a bookstore and browse, and you'll discover titles like "Seven Secrets to a Happy Marriage," or "Five Keys to Financial Freedom." So, when we are confronted with a challenge or an issue in life, we say, "give me the formula." Give me the bullet list of what to do, so that we can take care of it.

The wealthy man who comes to Jesus is in a similar frame of mind, I think. But his dilemma is that he has followed the "bullet list" since he was a small boy. He has met every rule. He has ticked off every single box on the survey.

But the problem with this kind of approach to life is that when the focus is on what you *do*, how do you know when you've done enough? How do you deal with that inner discomfort that always hounds you, always asking you if you could have done just a little bit more?

In the case of this young man, he comes to Jesus, and he asks Jesus what he might be missing. Jesus' initial response is to remind him of the bullet list. Keep the commandments. Do these things, and don't do certain others.

This is no problem for the young man, who has maintained a very neat list since he was a little kid.

In point of fact, this young man's question is also our question, and the path he takes is similar to our journeys. How often we spend inordinate amounts of time and energy seeking our salvation in what we *do*.

Perhaps our earthly parents were strict with us, and gaining their approval was difficult. And we carry that baggage around into our life of faith. Our Christian life then becomes one big "check off" list of doing this, that or the other. We spend the bulk of our time trying to gain God's approval, wanting desperately to be loved. We follow all the rules. We can "tick off" every item on the list. We perform every action required. And at the end of the day, we still lack peace. Like the wealthy young man, we are left asking, "Lord, what more must I do?"

The answer to that question comes to us from Jesus. He answers not merely by what he says, but also by what he does.

Before Jesus says anything to this young man, Mark provides us a detail that Matthew and Luke omit in their version of the story. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at this young man and that he genuinely *loved him*.

How ironic. This young man is hammering every point on the bullet list in an effort to find the love and peace and acceptance by God that he seeks. And here he looks into the eyes of One in whom that love and acceptance *are already present to him*. The love and acceptance this young man so desperately seeks is already present to him in Jesus. He is loved in the midst of his striving, and even in spite of it.

But Jesus loves him in another way. He shows his love for him by telling him the truth about himself, and about what he really needs. He shows this young man that salvation is more than ticking off spiritual check boxes. Salvation involves an invitation to a *relationship*, a relationship that is open-ended and that requires he give himself away without reserve.

It's as if Jesus looks him in the eye and says: "young man, if you want eternal life, you must do more than follow rules. You must follow *me*. And when you follow me, everything that might keep you from giving your whole life to me must be laid aside. So here's what you need to do. Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor. Then come and follow me."

An important question that arises at this point is whether Jesus' challenge to this young man is a universal call to poverty. That is, are Jesus' words here addressed to all of us, or just to this man in his individual situation?

The wider biblical context provides us some clues as we seek to answer this question. There are three encounters between Jesus and wealthy persons in the New Testament which we should examine.

First, Jesus encounters Zaccheaus, who was a wealthy tax collector. That is an amazing episode, but interestingly, Jesus does not call on Zaccheaus to sell all he has and give it to the poor.

Second, Jesus encounters Joseph of Arimethea, who the Bible describes as a man of great means. Jesus does not ask him to sell everything he possesses and give it to the poor.

Thirdly, Jesus encounters Nicodemus, a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin or Jewish Senate. In all of their amazing conversation, Jesus never tells Nicodemus to sell all he has and give it to the poor.

I have no doubt that Jesus is sincere when he tells this young man what he must do. But to extrapolate Jesus' words to this young man as a universal command to all of us is to make a mistake. *This is not a universal call to poverty. This is an invitation to discipleship.* Jesus is inviting this man to enter into a relationship with him, a relationship that is open-ended and demands his life, his soul, his all.

When Mark tells us that Jesus looked at this man, and "loved him," he speaks more truth than he knows. The pathos pours out of this text. Indeed, Jesus

loves this man so much that he invites him to something more than following rules and ticking off check boxes. He loves him enough to tell him the truth about who he is and what he needs. And in the end, Jesus' love is so strong for this young man that he lets him go.

And as the young man walks away, Jesus turns his attention to us -- right here this morning. He looks at *you*, and he loves *you*. He genuinely loves *you*. Some of you this morning have spent your entire life seeking God's approval, checking off every box you know in an effort to win God's love. You've followed every rule. You're like a dog chasing its tail, or better yet, you've been trying to force a camel through the eye of a needle.

But hear this Good News this morning. The love and approval you so frantically seek are *already yours*. Jesus' love for you is not based on your ability to fulfill a bullet list.

And just as he did with the wealthy young man, Jesus calls us into relationship and reminds us that the Christian life is not merely about what we *do*; it's about who we *become*.

Jesus may or may not ask you to sell all you have this morning. But be assured that following him is an open-ended proposition that demands all you have and all that you are. Following him may lead you down paths of trial, persecution,

and difficulty. It may cost you everything you hold dear, in order that you may hold Jesus *dearer*.

But at the end of that road lies what you are desperately seeking -- eternal life.

In just a few moments, we will gather at this table. Through the tangible signs of bread and wine Jesus proclaims his love for you this morning, every bit as much as if he were standing right here among us.

And through these signs Jesus also invites us anew to *follow him*. To lay aside everything that might stand in the way of that. To give away what we cannot keep in order to gain what we cannot lose. So count the cost; pay it gladly; and follow him with joy in your hearts.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.