

Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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We live in a world of extremes. Just this week, scientists reminded us that the rapid intensification of Hurricane Michael was a result of the extreme global temperatures. As election day grows closer, we hear politicians on all sides use extreme rhetoric and fear-based tactics to win. Our culture's idolatry of individualism has contributed to our country's extreme polarization and a lack of empathy. Time and again, we see that extremism has taken over religion giving us ISIS, the Christian Crusades, and the Biblical records of genocide committed by Jewish people.

So too, in today's gospel, Jesus spoke with extreme rhetoric. He demanded that a wealthy man sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow him. Jesus also communicated extreme judgment in saying that it is impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. What exactly is going on here?

At a cursory glance, you might think that the passage occurs during our giving campaign to encourage your support of the church. While I'm, generally, in favor of the sentiment, that's not the crux of what's happening.

Here, we find a man who has "many possessions." Based on his response to Jesus's command to give it all away, he seems to have some affinity for these

possessions. It must have been shocking for this man to discover that he loved his possessions more than eternal life. After all, he had kept all the commandments!

Given that this man had many possessions, I'd like to think that he was good at whatever he did to earn these possessions. In fact, it was common belief in Jesus's time that money and possessions indicated God's favor. If you didn't have money or possessions, that was seen as punishment from God. Not a lot has changed in this inaccurate belief about God. However, I can think of times in my life where I find something that I'm good at doing or that seems to be going well, and I put all of my time into that activity. The thing is: what I believe to have power over eventually controls me.

This last week, my new feed was scattered with reminders that October 11 was National Coming Out Day. I thought back to my early life where being gay was not only unacceptable but it was also demonized. For social survival, I had to act straight. While I'm not sure that I ever "passed" as straight, I had firmly convinced myself that I was. In controlling my narrative, this narrative eventually controlled me. And like the rich man in today's text, when I finally learned that letting go of my "straight fantasy" was required for me to truly live, I was shocked and full of grief.

You may not have to come out like me, but we all have “rich man” experiences. It could be the moment when you realize that the well-paying job that was supposed to give you the house, car, and life you wanted has become the master of your life and schedule. Or, when you realize that the drinks you had to be social have now become prioritized over your relationships and responsibilities. Or, when you discover that your consumption has been a thread in the tapestry of global warming but you still cannot break your love of shopping and the low-price of dirty energy. So, when you take a step back and look at your values, you are shocked and grieved to think about the change needed to experience God’s eternal life. For, we become so dependent on the things that we think communicate our control and power, but it turns out that we hold so tight to our possessions, our money, our status, and our power that we firmly misunderstand that eternal life is finding a dependence on God’s actions and not on our own.

If you remember, today's story started when a rich man asked "what can I *do* to inherit eternal life." There's a sense of absurdity in his question, for you cannot *do* anything to inherit something. You inherit when someone dies. Yet, that rich man, along with you and me, work so hard to *do* and control that we forget the extreme gift that Jesus recalled. We forget that we cannot save ourselves from our destructive practices by doing something else. Rather, we are saved by surrendering ourselves to our God who makes all things possible. We are liberated from our obsessions with money, power, and control when we accept the gracious inheritance of community and compassion. We are given eternal life when we take a step back and see the radical gift given in baptism.

And, Maya's baptism has illustrated that so beautiful today. There was nothing Maya did in her own baptism. It was a gift from God. A life-long gift of learning to let go of our control and fixations. And, if you're anything like me, that gift in baptism is a daily pursuit. It's not a one and done kind of thing. It's not something to check off a "to-do list." It's realizing that to overcome the power of money, the pride of success, and the fear of being exposed is to let it go.

Friends, today's gospel is difficult. It's full of extremes. It's uncomfortable and challenging. Yet, our God gives us the extremes to remind us of the beauty of surrender. Sure, it feels like a loss, but it is the gift of eternal life. In that new way of living, you may discover the daily challenge of making all things about caring and sharing. You might discover that "business as usual" is not the way of our God. You probably will discover that our God goes to the extremes to communicate the gift of love and grace. Thanks be to God for this gift of loss and life. Amen.