

Rev. Beth J. Costlow

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-31

October 10, 2021

Prepared for: Lutheran Church of Our Saviour, Greenville SC

- Great-grandpa Goman. Blue-collar worker whose income barely covered what was needed to clothe, feed, and shelter seven children.
 - He wanted better for his children so he ensured that his sons all learned skills.
 - Grandpa Goman had eight children of his own and also worked hard to provide for their needs.
 - First job: Go-for at my great-grandpa's job sites.
 - Doing all the stuff that the skilled laborers refused to do.
 - No matter how hard or dirty, Grandpa did it all!
 - His hard work paid off. He ended up receiving training in plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, and masonry.
 - Skills honed in building and maintaining the home he built (with his own sons' help) for his own family.
 - Skills that helped him progress from go-fer to skilled worker to supervisory positions.
 - But Grandpa was frugal. As his income increased, he maintained the same near-poverty standard of living for the family.
 - Saved money until he starts his own company.
 - And, as I said, he and Grandma were able to remain financially secure right up until their deaths.
 - This is the “American Dream,” isn’t it? Work hard and you will be rewarded. I’m sure that a few of your families have similar stories.
 - Newsflash: It’s not uniquely American. It’s not even unique to the 19th, 20th, or 21st centuries!
- The notion that hard work is rewarded is exactly what motivates the question asked of Jesus today, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”
 - Such a human question.
 - Even Lutherans, who know that we are saved purely by the grace of God, seen most clearly in the love embodied in Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, want to retain some measure of control over eternity, don’t we?
 - We use language that suggests this on a regular basis.

- “You’ve sure earned your spot in heaven!” (or something similar) to the person who prepared a funeral meal, cleaned the trash from the church property, or does any number of tasks for those in need.
- Jesus’ initial response to this man seems to affirm his idea that obedience is rewarded. “You know the commandments. Be obedient!”
 - “But I AM!” says the man!
 - Wait! What?
 - I hope that we twenty-first century Lutherans know better than to claim obedience to *any* of God’s commands, let alone *all* of them.
 - We don’t get to heaven because we’ve earned it, but because God loves us. Period.
 - That was the cultural theology that surrounded this man, though. Obedience reaped reward.
 - And isn’t it really the same cultural theology that surrounds us?
 - Works get rewarded.
 - That’s pretty much what the loudest, most dominant preaching voices in our nation are teaching, too.
 - “If you keep God first place, He’ll bring what you need.” (Joel Osteen)
 - “You have the right to decide where you’re going to spend eternity. You have a right to make that decision, and God will back your decision.” (Kenneth Copeland)
 - “God wants to be part of everything that we do. He wants to use us in very important ways. He chooses to work with and through us, which means that we have to be willing to do our part.” (Joyce Meyer)
- “Nope,” says Jesus, “That’s not how the economy of God works.”
 - You aren’t rewarded for putting God first.
 - You don’t get to decide where you spend eternity.
 - You don’t even have to be willing to do what God asks.
- “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”
 - In other words, “Love your neighbor.”
 - Simple as that.
 - But not really. It’s just that difficult, especially for those of us who are accustomed to some measure of comfort for ourselves.

- And then, seeing the disciples' confusion, Jesus adds, "It's gonna be hard for the wealthy!"
 - The man's response? "He went away shocked and grieving."
- Why? Because loving neighbor often means giving up some of our creature comforts.
 - Abundance should be shared.
 - My over-stocked pantry, which offers my family the comfort of knowing that we will be well-fed, should be shared with those who have no such comfort.
 - My (seasonally) warm or cool, comfortable home should be shared with those who are forced to live without shelter.
 - My closets full of clean, well-made clothing should be a little less full so that others may have enough.
 - No matter how generous we might feel, the truth is that as long as anyone has abundance and others have a lack, we are failing at loving our neighbor.
 - We are failing.
- Ah, but then comes the Good News. "For mortals it's impossible. But God can do anything!"
 - God can make a blind man see. God did make that blind man see.
 - God can make a deaf man hear. God did make that deaf man hear.
 - God can feed a crowd of thousands with just a few fish and a couple loaves of bread. God did feed that crowd.
 - And God can bring us—a broken, sinful, selfish humanity—into the kingdom of heaven. All of those "dids" point ahead to what God will do for us!
 - Amen.