

**Series: Generosity**  
**Today: Examining Our Priorities**  
**Text: Matthew 19:16-23**

**A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**  
**Sunday, October 28, 2007**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

As I was gathering resources for this sermon, I was surprised to find that I had never preached on the story of the Rich Young Ruler. In 36 years of ministry, this is a text I have managed to avoid, and I don't know why.

It is a perfect passage for the Sunday when we bring our estimates of giving to be dedicated to God because it deals with priorities, and when we make our commitments to giving, it helps us establish our spending priorities. It is all part of what we have been talking about for the last several weeks: *Generosity* as one of the intentional practices of the Christian faith. Today we actually get the opportunity to practice one of the things generosity calls us to do: to return to God a portion of what God has given us.

Heidi Husted, a colleague of mine compares learning generosity to a little girl in her church who experienced a major breakthrough in her life when she learned to tie her own shoes. Instead of excitement, she was overcome by tears.

Heidi asked, *"Why are you crying?"* And the little girl responded *"I just learned how to tie my shoes."* Heidi said, *"Isn't that something you have wanted to do so you could be a big girl and take care of yourself?"* And she responded, with big tears in her eyes, *"Yes, but I just realized I am going to have to do it for the rest of my life."*

Heidi says that some of us feel the same way when it comes to generosity. If we are lucky, we learn that it's exciting to give, but isn't there just a tiny bit of dread because

we know we have to do it over and over again for the rest of our lives? (source: Heidi Husted, "The Sermon on the Amount," Preaching Today).

Our text for this morning is about a young man who never quite grasped the message of generosity. We know it as the story of the Rich Young Ruler. It is a story which appears in all three of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:15-23), so it is one of those events we can be reasonably sure took place in the life of Jesus. All three Gospels let us know that he is rich, but only Matthew says that he is young, and only Luke says that he is a ruler. It is the story of a young man's desire to be faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

In order to examine the story for its meaning in our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives, I would like us to look at it as the story unfolds. Here is our outline for this morning: The Question; The Answer; and The Decision.

### **The Question**

The question which the young man asks seems like a good one on the surface. It is a question one might think we would all want to be asking. *“Teacher: What good deed must I do to have eternal life?”* It is the age-old question that all of us wrestle with. The culture in which we live measures worth by what we do, not who we are, and until we answer the question with our faith, we are tempted to become “human doings” rather than human beings. We believe that we are created in the image of God, redeemed by the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit. If what we do fails to flow from that identity, we are destined to try and prove our worth over and over again by depending on a list of accomplishments. When we know that we are saved by grace and grace alone, we do what we do out of gratitude, not out of duty.

When the young man comes to Jesus, he senses that there is a question behind the question. The Greek word for *eternal* does not mean lasting forever. This is not a question about what happens after we die. Eternal life means living our lives such as befits God, or such as belongs to God, or such as is characteristic of God. The essence of eternal life is not keeping a checklist of accomplishments. It is an attitude of loving and sacrificial generosity toward our fellow human beings because we have been the recipients of God's sacrificial generosity in Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite movies is *Dead Man Walking* which is based on a true story about Sister Helen Prejean, a nun (played by Susan Sarandon) who agrees to offer spiritual counsel to Matthew Poncelet, a man on death row. This angers Mr. and Mrs. Percy, the parents of the teenage girl Poncelet murdered, as they can't understand how she could sympathize with someone who committed such a savage act.

Mr. Percy says, "How can you sit with that scum?"

Sister Helen, somewhat anxious and groping for words, answers, "Mr. Percy, I've never done this before. I'm just trying to follow the example of Jesus, who said that every person is worth more than their worst act."

The Rich Young Ruler is like most of us. He wants one thing he can do to find fulfillment in his faith journey. The problem is that all too often we forget the one thing we need has already been accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is nothing we can do that will make God love us more than God loves us at this very moment. We can live our lives gratefully and generously as a response to that love, but we cannot earn it. It is a gift.

### The Answer

Jesus is patient with this man, however. He does give him an answer. Jesus points him to the five commandments which have to do with our responsibility to others and closes it by saying, *“You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.”* We must extend to others the same generosity of love we have received at the hand of God if we want to find the purposes of God in our own lives.

The Rich Young Ruler thought he was home free. He had kept the commandments Jesus listed. He hadn't murdered anyone, robbed anyone, or lied to anyone. He had honored his parents. He had been an upstanding citizen, but something was still missing in his relationship with God, and he wanted that more than anything—or at least he thought he did. So he said, *“I have done all these things. What do I still lack?”*

There wasn't a thing wrong with the way he had lived his life. Yet one thing stood in his way. Jesus says to him, *“Go and sell all your possessions, give the money to the poor, then come and follow me.”*

This was not the standard answer that Jesus gave to everyone. When Nicodemus came and asked him a similar question, Jesus didn't tell Nicodemus to give all he had to the poor. He told him that he needed to be born again. When Zacchaeus sought what might fulfill his life, Jesus didn't give him a list of rules. He asked to be a guest in his home, and as a result of that meal, Zacchaeus paid back everyone he had cheated 400% on the dollar. Lives are changed because of the relationship they have with Jesus Christ. Lives are lived in grateful response for that relationship. This is the Christian life.

Jesus could see that it was the man's wealth which was getting in his way of experiencing the fullness of the Christian life. The things he thought he owned really owned him. They owned his values, his attitudes, and his belief system.

There was a fourth Gospel where this story is recorded which never made it into our Bible. It was called the Gospel according to the Hebrews. The way the encounter with Jesus is recorded in that Gospel may shed some light on the root of the young man's problem. In the Gospel according to the Hebrews, Jesus says to the man, *"Go, sell all you have and distribute it to the poor, and come and follow me."* *But the rich man began to scratch his head for what he heard did not please him. And Jesus said to him, "How can you say you have kept the law and the prophets? For it is written in the law: 'Thou shalt love your neighbor as yourself; and lo many of your brothers and sisters, the Sons of Abraham are clad in filth, dying of hunger and your house is full of many good things, and nothing at all goes out of it to them.'" (Barclay, DSB, p. 215).*

Somehow Jesus knew that it was the wealth of the Rich Young Ruler which had been in his way of seeing the needs of the poor. It had gotten in the way of loving others. He knew that until he was able to be free of things and invest his life in people, and especially invest his life in the poor, he would be blocked from taking his next step in the journey of faith.

There is an organization in Portland, OR called Bridgetown Ministries which directs the energy of Christians who want to help the homeless. In addition to providing hot meals, shaves, and haircuts, some of the volunteers actually wash the feet of homeless people.

Tom Krattenmaker, a writer for USA Today, was stunned by the display, calling it "one of the most audacious acts of compassion and humility I have ever witnessed."

This group of society's outcasts had their bare feet immersed in warm water, scrubbed, dried, powdered, and placed in clean socks. One man reported with a smile, "I can't find the words to describe how good that felt."

Krattenmaker commented on the significance of this foot washing: "Washing someone's feet is an act best performed while kneeling. Given the washer's position, and the unpleasant appearance and odor of a homeless person's feet, it's hard to imagine an act more humbling."

In preparation for their outreach, the leader of Bridgetown Ministries offered these words: "When you go out there tonight, I want you to look for Jesus. You might see him in the eyes of a drunk person, a homeless person...we're just out there to love people as they are in the name of Jesus." (Source: Tom Krattenmaker, "A Witness to What Faith Can Be," USA Today 12-18-06);

### **The Decision**

We are told that the Rich Young Ruler left Jesus grieving. He was deeply sad. He wanted to follow Jesus. He believed that he was good enough to follow him.

However, if it required him to give up what he had accumulated, he just wasn't ready.

I think this is where all of us find difficulty following Jesus in one way or another. I have met many seekers and searchers in my life, but there are probably precious few of us in this Sanctuary this morning who don't have something in our lives which keeps us from following Jesus the way we would like to follow him. For some it may be career; getting ahead in our jobs is the thing we could not lay down if Jesus asked us to follow

him. For others it may be family; the safety and security of our family is more important to us than following Jesus. Being sure we have enough to pay for our children's college education keeps us from being committed to returning to God the portion that God is due. For still others it may be our insecurity about the future. We want to hang on to what we have because we are not sure there will be enough left to take care of us if our health should fail. Have you ever thought about the thing or things which keep you from being a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ?

As I was wrestling with the one thing which I might have difficulty surrendering in order to follow Christ, I decided that it was more than one thing and I couldn't choose. My role in your lives as a pastor came to mind. It has been an honor to serve this church and be an intimate part of your lives, but the day will come when I will no longer be your pastor. It is my guess that on that day I may experience the grace of God in a whole new way if Jesus Christ is truly at the center of my life for I will discover that my identity is not in being your pastor, but in following Christ. Do you know the thing in your life which you would find difficult surrendering to Christ if he asked you to give it to him?

At our Session meeting about ten days ago, we were talking about what we were getting from this series on generosity. Dave Reist, one of our Elders, told us the story of a friend of his whose car was the one thing which was getting in the way of his following Jesus. He drove a Mercedes SUV which was fully loaded, and he loved to park it outside his business or in his driveway as something of a status symbol.

One day Dave observed that he hadn't seen his friend's car for several days. In its place was a ten-year-old Honda without many luxuries. Dave assumed a financial reversal had taken place in his friend's life, so he went to console him, and to his great

surprise, he learned that the car had not been repossessed. It had been sold. His friend said, *“My church needed it more than I did, and it all belongs to God, doesn’t it? I am just giving God back what was God’s in the first place.”*

### **Conclusion**

This is a story about a man who was not able to make that kind of decision, and he went away sad because he had great possessions. He asked a question: “What great thing must I DO to inherit eternal life?” He got an answer: “Go and sell all you have, give it to the poor, then come and follow me.” And he went away sad because his possessions meant more to him than his desire to follow Christ.

May we who have come to make our commitments today not leave this place sad because of what we own or what owns us.