

For the people of St. Philip's
B Proper 23
Mark 10:17-31
Maria Hoecker, preacher
October 11, 2009

There's a story I heard once about an expert in diamonds who happened to be seated on an airplane beside a woman with a huge diamond on her finger. Finally, the man introduced himself and said, "I couldn't help but notice your beautiful diamond. I am an expert in precious stones. Please tell me about that stone." The woman replied, "This is the famous Klopman diamond, one of the largest in the world. But there is a strange curse that comes with it." Now the man was really interested. He asked, "What is the curse?" As he waited with bated breath, she replied, "It's Mr. Klopman."

Some of you may wish to re-evaluate the real cost of your rocks.....

We all have a story to tell about hard choices in life. Today's Gospel reading is one of those stories. The rich man is one of those characters from the Bible who chose the road *most* traveled. It is implied that he couldn't let go of his stuff and so he walked away from eternal life. He asked all the right questions. He was faithful to the Law and he understood Jesus' teaching. By virtue of his wealth he was in a powerful position of authority. He was richly rewarded for his rule-following. But in the end, it is written, he chose to stay with his familiar even though it would keep him outside of the Kingdom. He stayed with his "safe."

I'm not sure how I feel about this Gospel. I wonder if I'm making the same choice that the rich man made. I'm not sure. Such a profound choice cannot be coerced. It must come from deep within. Paul Wadell has written a reflection on today's Gospel in a recent (October 6, 2009) issue of *The Christian Century*. He suggests that the focus of this cautionary tale is that we are "most afraid of what we most need." I wonder what fear is locked up in my "safe" ?

As the story is told, a wealthy man runs to Jesus with an urgent request. This man is restless, unsatisfied, a seeker. Despite all that he has, he still yearns for more. Jesus looks at the man and loves him. Jesus tells him some simple Good News. "Give it *all* up and come follow me," says Jesus, but that doesn't sound like good news to this rich man. It's not what he wants to hear. He wants some rules to follow...not a call to follow Jesus himself. The man chooses instead to walk away in grief. He grieves as he goes back to what he already knows will not satisfy him, but it feels more secure. This religious man who kept the commandments deeply knew that his possessions and his perceived authority imprisoned him, yet he willingly returned to his captivity.

Perhaps, in the days that followed, the seemingly rich man re-thought his decision. Maybe he returned, freed from his trap-pings to follow Jesus. The invitation is always out there. It is sitting out there for us today, all of us. Believe me, just because one is ordained doesn't necessarily mean that *Jesus'* call is being followed. We all make our choices. Will we respond to Jesus' loving invitation to release our worldly rewards, or will we make the choice to sadly turn away from Jesus' clear and simple call?

Last Sunday we celebrated the life of St. Francis of Assisi. Traditionally we bless animals on that day...we did here last Sunday afternoon...you should have seen all the cute puppy faces peeking around these pews all up and down the aisle. But remembering Francis isn't just about blessing the

cute animals, that's what we do to get you in here. There's a deeper story to be told about St. Francis, which goes beyond the animals. The story of St. Francis is the story of a saint who gave it all up. He too was a rich boy who hungered for something deeper than what the world had to offer.

In Franco Zeffirelli's beautiful film about the life of St. Francis, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon," the turning point in the story comes when Francis of Assisi, born and raised in a wealthy and privileged (and religiously observant) family, stands before the entire town, including the local bishop and his parents, strips off his clothes, and walks off into the mountains to live among the poor as a beggar. Francis is responding to a call that has troubled him since he returned home, ill with fever, from an adventure of fighting in a war between warring rich folks. His life before the war no longer makes sense, and he feels his soul being pulled toward a different way, a radical giving up of everything that has been laid out for him. Francis was not just sick; in spite of his family's wealth, he was hungry and thirsty and lost. It made no sense, but he walked away from it and toward Jesus. His story is legend: he didn't hide. He wasn't alone in his poverty. All along the way Francis formed faithful friendships with the people of Assisi, with his many Franciscan brothers, and also with Saint Clare, a faithful woman. That's what saved him.

So how is it that a rich man can keep all of his stuff and walk away from Jesus, feeling empty and alone...and a saint such as Francis can strip himself of all he owns and move toward Jesus in the fullness of grace and friendship? What did Francis see in Jesus that the rich man could not see? Who was rich and who was poor? It's all a matter of perception.

It's all in how you look at it. *Our sense of scarcity and abundance is a mostly a matter of perception.* Obviously, extreme poverty is about a severe lack of food/shelter/safety/drinkable water. That's not what I'm talking about here when I talk about our own perceptions of scarcity and abundance. How many times have I heard someone say, "We grew up dirt poor, but we didn't know it. We were happy. We had each other." How many times have we heard successful, yet estranged couples say, "we had so much more fun when we first started out, we were poor but we were happy. We didn't have all this stuff to take care of, we took care of each other."

One theory out there is that when we start to feel like we're running low, often it has very little to do with what is held in reserve. If someone feels poor, it's actually a signal that he or she feels alone in the world. Even in the midst of a crowd, or a marriage, one can feel utterly alone. It's when we are connected to people; in relationship with others who are close to us; with people who are listening to us; showing us trust and kindness; when we feel loved by another.... it is then that we feel a sense of abundant fullness.... regardless of our material wealth, personal achievement and social status. St. Francis trusted in the abundance of his community even as he walked away from all of his "stuff." Jesus knows we need each other. Jesus knows our stuff can divide us. Jesus knows we need to let it all go.

This is why today's story is particularly poignant, Jesus' simple request is obviously meant to free the rich man... it's a loving invitation to break free from all that possesses him. Such a profound choice cannot be coerced. It must come from deep within. "Give up what holds you back and come follow me," says Jesus. "Join my broken, hopeful family. Walk with me." As the story goes on, we know Jesus *will* connect his followers to God's Great Family which spans through all places and in all times. That's where we come into the story. We are connected. We are connected to each other. We are connected to the poor, the children, and the outcast~ they are connected to us. It is our bond that saves us. None of us are alone. Jesus offers all of us a life-line to a great communion of saints, which fills us with a deep sense of abundance. We can release our gifts when our lives are filled with purpose and grace in community. Whether we're first or last, we're in it together...and that makes all the difference in the world. Amen.