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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, October 10, 2021**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 28/Proper 23/Year B**  
**First Reading: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15**  
**Second Reading: Hebrews 4:12-16**  
**Gospel Reading: Mark 10:17-31**  
**Sermon Title: “Selling Out to Godliness”**

## **Theme**

*Jesus has been teaching his disciples about what is most valued in God’s eyes. Now, a conversation with a rich man brings his message home to the disciples in a way that is surprising but unforgettable.*

## **Text**

<sup>17</sup>As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup>You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’ ” <sup>20</sup>He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” <sup>21</sup>Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup>Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” <sup>24</sup>And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>26</sup>They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” <sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

<sup>28</sup>Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” <sup>29</sup>Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, <sup>30</sup>who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

## Sermon

One of the things that I learned in seminary is that the Lutheran tradition of preaching is that scripture often includes both Law and Gospel, and if it does not, then it is the preacher's job to bring both. The Law judges and demands repentance and change, and the Gospel is the salve of mercy and grace. Even as a preacher for now over 24 years, it is sometimes difficult to know whether we are dealing with Gospel or Law. And given this Gospel Reading for today, we might ask if there is any Gospel present. To further confound us, I'm going to suggest that there is both Law and Gospel, judgment and grace in this story, and in this story, they are the same thing. Sometimes, the only difference between good news and bad news is our perspective when we get the news! Let's take a look.

Probably all of us have had experiences where we had to hear difficult words spoken to us that, at the time, we may have thought were harsh words of judgment, but then turned out to be the most loving thing anyone ever said to us. As I said, sometimes it's difficult to tell the good news from the bad.

Take the example of a man who got a devastating prognosis after his annual check-up. The doctor told him, "You are overweight, you smoke and you drink too much. There is too much stress in your life and I am willing to bet, your quality of life is not very good and it isn't for your wife and kids either. You need to make changes in your life or your health is going to continue to decline and you will die before your time. And then, what will you leave? A grieving widow and children who never really got the opportunity to get to know you, and a thankless company who will just move on to use up another employee."

That man might have been infuriated. "You can't talk to me like that! I am your customer!"

Or the man might finally listen to his doctor, it could be argued, *his teacher*, and make the necessary changes that will improve and prolong his life.

Was the appointment with the doctor and the doctor's prognosis of the man's health good news or bad?

We have a similar scenario in this morning's Gospel Reading from Mark. Now

right off I note that one of the troubling things about this story is that Mark did not tell it exactly the same way that it's told in the other synoptic Gospels. Matthew called the man a "young man." Luke called him a "ruler who was very rich." Mark wrote simply that he was a "man," that is, just a guy off the street, an ordinary person with no particular pedigree; one we can relate to. Later in the story, we are told that he "had many possessions," but who among us doesn't fit that description? We may not be rich, or young, but we all have lots of stuff. So right off the bat, we have a sneaking suspicion that this story might apply to us. In fact, it might be a story about us.

Mark casually mentioned that Jesus was "setting out on a journey." You know what that means. We are in chapter ten and the night Jesus was betrayed is in chapter fourteen. So you know where this "journey" is going to end in just a few more chapters - the cross. And as he began this fateful journey, he was encountered by a man who had "many possessions," who addressed him as "Good Teacher." Jesus was a teacher of sorts. Some others applied the title of rabbi to him.

The young man was religiously inclined and attempted to engage Jesus in a discussion about obtaining eternal life. The man knelt before Jesus so that Jesus could not continue without dealing with the man. Focused on continuing his journey, Jesus gave him the short answer; 'Go and obey all of the commandments, and then come back and we can talk.'

The man surely startled Jesus by saying, 'Oh, I've obeyed all the commandments, since I was a kid in Sunday School. I've never broken any of the commandments.'

Now Mark gave us no reason to doubt that the man at least had convinced himself of his piety and obedience to the Law of Moses. And, it turned out, this man was not only successful materially (he has lots of stuff) but he was also successful religiously (he devoutly obeyed the Law of Moses). Who among us would claim to be so devout? Jesus was confronted by a man who was a high achiever, a great success both materially and religiously.

So, maybe in one last attempt to really move the conversation along, Jesus said to him, 'I love you, and because I love you, I'm going to give you something I don't just give to everybody – an invitation to join me. I want you to go, sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and then come follow me.'

With that, Mark wrote that this man, slumped down, got depressed, got back into his Porsche, and left. He was shocked by what the good teacher told him. He went away “grieving, for he had many possessions.” Immediately he lost interest in the subject, dropped the class, disregarded the invitation, and went in the opposite direction of the “good teacher.” And with that Jesus said, ‘Man, it is hard to save these young rich ones.’

‘How hard is it, Jesus?’ asked his disciples.

Jesus responded, ‘It is about as hard as getting a fully loaded camel through the eye of a needle! Impossible! (pause) Of course, with God, I suppose anything is possible, even this.’

What do we have here, good news or bad? Law or Gospel?

Some might say bad news. We are ordinary Americans who have lots of stuff, who have come to church this morning to be taught by Jesus. We come to Jesus asking, “Good Teacher, what must we do to inherit eternal life?” I think we can all agree, it is a very important question.

Here in this story, a sincere seeker came to the feet of Jesus to be taught, and the class ends in failure. In fact, I believe this is the only call story in all the Gospels where someone was given an invitation to follow Jesus and rejected it! Someone, a man, maybe young, maybe rich, maybe just a man, was being asked to come follow Jesus. But he was shocked and grieved by what Jesus taught him. So he refused Jesus’ invitation, and the reason was ... possessions, stuff, wealth. This is bad news, a discouraging teaching about how our material attachments, our false gods and idolatries, keep us from following Jesus. The story ends in depression, in rejection. And that is the bad news about the good news. The Law in the Gospel.

But the good thing is, though this may be bad news, it doesn’t have to be our bad news.

The story doesn’t end there, does it? It doesn’t end with the young man’s rejection and exit. No, Peter, the premier disciple blurted out, “Lord, we have left everything, homes, family, friends, and we have followed you!”

In words we can relate to, Peter went on, ‘We are not like the inquiring man who

came up to you asking you idle theological questions but were shocked and grieved by your strange answers. Unlike him, when you called us, we did not slink away in the other direction. We came forth. We let go of a lot, to be embraced by you, to join on with your movement. We stayed the course, kept attending class, kept taking notes, even when we were shocked by what you taught us, even when we were grieved. Some days we wanted to walk away, go in the other direction, sleep in late because that would be easier than to be confronted by your often shocking words. But we did not. We stayed the course. We kept at it. We're still here.'

And then Jesus brought the Gospel. The story does not end in depression, grieving, and rejection, but in Jesus' glad promise, and in rejoicing. You see, although it's hard to find it in the way that Mark recorded it, the story ends with good news, Gospel. Jesus told the disciples, 'I promise you, for everything you have given up, I will give you much more. For everything you have turned your back on, I will give you ten times more. So believe the Good News!'

Sometimes, on Sundays, I look out among you and I see you as you are – contemporary disciples who are trying to follow Jesus. Jesus has set out on a journey, and even though you know full well where the journey ends, you continue walking with him. Even though you know that his teaching sometimes provokes shock and even grief, you still listen. You still follow. And for that, Jesus says, "Rejoice!"

Some of you have probably passed up promotions in your job and upward mobility because you wanted to be a good father or mother more than you wanted the money. Some of you turned your back on a great opportunity at work because you wanted to stay home and look after your mother or father after an illness. I know teenagers from this congregation who may not be voted "Most Popular" in the school annual because they have values and commitments that they learned from their parents, who learned them here from Jesus Christ. You didn't sell out to the culture. You sold out to godliness!

In the ending of this story, Jesus *doesn't* say to you, 'It is impossible to save any early 21st-century Americans.' Rather he says, 'the good news is, the Gospel that balances the Law it that though following me along my journey is difficult, you are doing it, and that is all I ask. With God all things are possible, even the salvation of ordinary folk like you.' Us.

The story seems to imply, if you want to feel bad and grieve, then grieve for those poor souls who have little more to live and die for than their stuff, their possessions, their selfish selves. We get to give our lives for Jesus! We get to follow him where he's going! And that is good news!

These last several weeks I've been trying to connect with our inactive members to remind them that we are still open, that they are missed, and that we would love to see them again. I have heard several reasons for their absences. Still today, the only good one is a personal concern over COVID – I refuse to pass judgment on anyone who doesn't feel safe going out.

But I've heard many other excuses that I don't think will wash with the Lord. "We're just lazy." "I worship God on the golf course or the deer blind." "I don't need organized religion to worship God." I am not passing judgment on their salvation, their Christianity, or spirituality, but many of them are simply not worshipping or involving themselves in any Christian community anywhere preferring to instead just stay home on Sunday morning or doing something that gives them pleasure. I'm all for pleasure, but really? An hour on Sunday morning is too much to ask? I am willing to bet the one who gave up his Friday afternoon to die on a cross for us probably finds that offensive. Yes, God will forgive, but that's relying on cheap grace. As disciples, we know better and we should do better. And I know, I'm preaching to the choir – you are the faithful ones.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

You are the ones who come back week in and week out and hear the occasional difficult teaching or harsh word from the Lord. I live in the illusion that some of you actually take it with you when you leave and chew on it during the week and see for yourselves whether it applies to you. Maybe some of you actually make changes in your lives based on my preaching of the word from the Lord. You may not have liked what was said, but because you answered God's call and want to be obedient, eternal life will be your reward.

But there are others who, like the man in the story, came to be taught by the Lord, didn't hear what they wanted to hear, and as a result may have turned down the greatest gift they ever received.

Sometimes it takes a teacher, a really good teacher, to bring out the best in us, to tell us, not what we think we *want* to hear, but what we *need* to hear. And when we dare to listen, dare to follow, then we can rejoice, both now and forevermore.

So rejoice, despite all the difficulties, Jesus has told us the truth. He has stripped us down of all the meaningless stuff to which we cling. He is drawing us through that narrow needle's eye toward the way that leads to eternal life. I know it sounds impossible, but with God, all things really are possible.

### **Prayer**

Loving, graceful, merciful God, give us open ears to hear, and willing hearts to follow our teacher, Jesus Christ, your Son, who is our guide through the narrow way that leads to eternal life with you. We pray this in his name. Amen