

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 11, 2009  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
Buffalo, New York  
The Rev. Eric Olaf Olsen

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There were certain streetwise behaviors that I picked up as a young teen growing up in NYC. Probably the most important unwritten rule was: Do not make eye contact with anyone outside of your circle of friends, classmates and family. If you did, you ran the very real risk of hearing those fighting words, “What do you think you’re looking at!” This was, of course, an unanswerable question. If you said, “Nothing,” the reply would be - “You calling me nothing!” If you claimed to be looking at something other than the person questioning you, you would probably be called a liar and would be asked repeatedly to provide an answer until you stuttered out some kind of apology - or you would find yourself in the middle of a fight. There were times that I rode the 1 & 9 subway or the Richmond Terrace/Bay Street bus when my eyes didn’t sore past the shoeline, there were other times that I found myself in a desperate debate, and there were times when words were followed by fists. Mostly I became good at avoidance. Are there any evasive moves that you developed over the years? What do you do when the fellowship chairperson is walking in your direction with the coffee hour list? Or when the chair of the nominating committee starts walking in your direction when there is an open council seat? Or when someone from the stewardship committee says they are going to start talking to members about their giving and you notice they are standing about twenty feet in front of you looking for someone to engage in dialogue? I think we all have some evasive techniques that we employ from time to time...

If the living Christ were to walk before us, would we turn our head as to pretend not to have noticed? Would we look in the other direction? Are we ready to encounter the Messiah, the anointed holy one of God? Could we be so bold as to approach Jesus as the rich man did? Could we throw ourselves at Jesus’ feet? If we could, what would we say and what would we ask? Is our faith as hungry and driven?

Often when we hear the biblical narrative we seek to insert ourselves into the story. We associate with specific characters as we try to appropriate meaning, comfort and strength from the sacred text. We hear this story about the rich man, and it is easy to dismiss him as not being serious enough about his faith. We judge him as half-hearted and quickly look for another hero, whom we find in Peter in the later part of the story. Jesus even acknowledges Peter as one who has truly sacrificed and who will be rewarded in this life and the next. If we had to pick a character to associate ourselves with, it would probably be Peter; after all we gave up a lot to come to church today, especially since it is a holiday weekend and the Bills are playing! We could have slept in or gone to an early brunch. As far as sacrifices go, soon in our liturgy it will be time to give our offering, and we brought our envelope today, but in these desperate economic times, we could use the money - right! We might even take it further by noting that most of the people we know don’t go to church anymore so we who do are like the little band of disciples traipsing along with our Lord. So it shouldn’t be surprising that we, like Peter in today’s text are

eager to hear about our reward for our sacrifice - but are we really like Peter? Did we leave our house and job and family to follow Jesus wherever he went? And while there was that denial thing before the rooster crowed, which we might want to claim as our own to excuse our many foibles, according to the second century Christian apologist Tertullian, and the early Christian scholar Origen, Peter's life ended in martyrdom. In Eusebius, Church History II.1. Origen states: "Peter was crucified at Rome with his head downwards, as he himself had desired to suffer". You see...Peter asked to be crucified upside down, because he did not feel worthy to be crucified in the same manner as the Good Lord.

Ok, maybe we are not just like Peter.... Maybe we are a far cry from being that faithful, and while we don't know how our life will end, I think it's fair to say that our sacrifices pale in comparison to this Galilean fisherman. So that leaves us again with the affluent seeker from the beginning of the gospel as perhaps our closest relative in the gospel narrative. How similar are we?

Are we rich? According to the calculator on Globalrichlist.com, a creation of the London based Poke Corporation who's mission is "...to challenge people's perceptions of their personal wealth." If your salary is \$150,000 per year, you are the world's 20 millionth richest person, in the top 1/3 of 1% of the world's population. If your salary is \$50,000 per year, you are the 59 millionth richest person in the world - in the top 1% of the world's population. If your salary is \$20,000 per year, you are the 670 millionth richest person - in the top 11% of the world's population. The site also reminds us that three billion people live on less than \$2 per day while 1.3 billion get by on less than \$1 per day. No matter how we slice it, we are rich, even if we feel like we are poor. It is all about perspective and that is what the Christ brings... a new perspective.

In the gospel, this man of means seeks out the Good Lord Jesus. He asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus' rattles off the commandments, and the man says that he has lived by them. (Perhaps this is how we are different from the man!) Then the text says that "Jesus, looking at him, loved him..." In the second reading from Hebrews, we read, "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow..." The word of God slices us open and lays us bare for inspection. Jesus, the living word of God, looks into the man and sees all. Jesus hones in on a big problem in this man's life, there is a wedge coming between himself and God. This wedge was his wealth. In the sixth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You can not serve both God and Mammon." Jesus exposes the sin, but he does not condemn the rich man, and that is where the love comes in. When you love someone, you give it to them straight even if it may be abrasive. If Jesus didn't care, if he didn't love the man, he may have just let him be, let him continue on his warped trajectory leading to death.

John Wesley, the Anglican Priest, who with his brother Charles founded the Methodist Church said, "When I have any money I get rid of it as quickly as possible, lest it find a way into my heart." The rich man's problem was not that he had wealth, but that the wealth had him, and that he was its slave. Just as God provided for the people of Israel to be free from Pharaoh's bondage, Jesus does not leave the man without a pathway to freedom from his slavery. Like a caring

physician, Jesus writes a detailed prescription for his beloved. "...Sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." The text said that Jesus' words of love and hope caused the man to grieve and go away, for he had many possessions.

Today we come into this sacred space, and we are transported by the liturgy and the music. But just as the prophet Amos reminds the people of the northern kingdom that worship is deeper and more encompassing than an hour in the temple, we are to remember that our liturgy or public work never ends and that we were created to be creatures of worship, seven days a week and three hundred and sixty-five days a year. The rich man was called not only to liquidate, but to alleviate and elevate. He was to use his tools, in this case his wealth, to remove suffering and raise those who were downtrodden to a place of equality. Notice there was no instruction by Jesus as to which particular poor person should be a recipient - all were considered worthy.

Only after the man lightened his load was he invited to come and follow Jesus. All of Jesus' disciples are called to travel light. We are called to travel light. Over the last 2000 years, there are many stories of people who heeded Christ's call of complete submission, some are famous such as St. Francis, who gave up great wealth for the life of a beggar, who wed lady poverty and who helped refocus the church on Christ's teachings. Others' may not be as famous, but God has and is working those same kinds of miracles through them.

Oh that we would listen to Jesus' call and give our wedges away!

Oh that we would not turn our gaze from Our Lord's loving eyes, that we would not avoid the prescription for freedom and life.

I have journeyed with many people in their last days of life and never have I heard anyone say that they gave too much to the poor, that they gave too much to the Church of Christ, or that they gave too much to God. I can tell you however, that through bitter tears, I have held the hands of many who prayed prayers of repentance, who regretted being so self centered and wished they had another chance to live more faithfully and give more generously.

Whatever happened to the rich man that walked away from Jesus grieving? We don't know. We might want to slap a happy ending on this tale, but we can't. It is sad and so is our reluctance to heed Jesus' call and take submission to the gospel seriously. It is sad, because we remain in a prison of which we have the key, yet we choose not to use it. Our potential is not reached, and we help less and less of God's hurting and needy children.

As a faith community we are hamstrung, and limited when we collectively choose a strategy of wealth management over complete submission to God's mission. The current climate of anxiety that exists in our congregation in response to our eroded endowment funds can be easily dissipated if more members heeded the words of the gospel and gave sacrificially instead of superficially. The fact that we are devoting so much of our time and energy as a congregation on matters of finance suggest that there is a wedge that needs to be removed. I say this because I love this church. I say this because it is true and it is our prescription for living. This is the

perspective that the Christ wants us to embrace yet this is the perspective that caused the rich man to go away grieving. Do we need to go away grieving? Do we remain enslaved?

Today we need not leave with a feeling of hopelessness - on the contrary! Today the Living Word of God, Jesus, does have the last word and it is a word of grace. While we might see our inability to follow, our paralysis and our grief as impossible to overcome... Jesus says, "For God all things are possible." God is looking at us, and God loves us - as we are and where we are. God wants to free us and will free us on the last day, but embracing the perspective that Christ offers us enables us to taste and feel some of that freedom now. That is the freedom we are immersed in through baptism and which we ingest in Holy Communion; it is generous, sacrificial and liberating.

So let us raise our gaze above the shoeline, and look at that love striaght in the face, there is nothing to fear and everything to gain.

In our Good Lord's name! Amen.