

“The Doctrine of Non-Accumulation” a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA) October 11, 2009

Text: Mark 10:17-31 As he 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?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.”’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ 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.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. 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!’ 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! 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.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’ Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ 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, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

LAST WEEK we heard some hard teaching from Jesus concerning divorce. It was sufficiently unsettling that a group of us met Wednesday evening to wrestle with it some more. How in the world might this harsh judgment on cultural morality apply to me, we asked? What did Jesus mean – this isn’t the Jesus I know!

Today’s text might feel similar. Although this time we cannot say “This isn’t the Jesus I know,” can we? The Gospel is rife with things like “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.” “Sell your possessions and give to the poor.” “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” “As you have done it for the least of them, you have done it for me.” “Seek first the kin-dom of God.” “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Non-accumulation is, in fact, one of the pillar teachings of Jesus.

Now we might say, “This is as impossible as eliminating divorce!” Yeah yeah, we say, this and forgive 70X7 and love your enemy – You don’t understand, Jesus, this is 2009 and we are a capitalist, consumer society and I love my stuff and I need my savings account.

I think Jesus did understand. He said, It is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. As he often does, he comically exaggerated in order to make his point.

There was a man who loved gold. He didn't have much, but he loved it. Then he inherited a fortune. With joy he redecorated his bedroom. He put gold parchment wallpaper up, hung yellow curtains, had a golden colored rug and a yellow bedspread. He even bought some yellow pajamas. But then he got sick and came down with, of all things, yellow jaundice. His wife called the doctor who made a house call and went up to that bedroom for an examination. The doctor stayed up there a long while. When he came down, the wife asked, "How is he?"

"Don't know," said the doctor. "I couldn't find him."

Jesus did not say it is impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom, he just said it was difficult. Nor did Jesus say it is bad to be rich. Jesus never teaches that we should not make money. Nowhere does he place limits on the amount of money we *earn*. When Jesus gave the command "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth," he literally meant that as his followers, we are not to accumulate unused wealth on this earth. Jesus' Doctrine of Non-Accumulation commands us to distribute rather than accumulate wealth, distribute whatever possessions you do not currently need toward the needs of others and for spreading the gospel.

In his new movie, Michael Moore asks: "Is capitalism a sin?" He goes on to ask, "Would Jesus be a capitalist?" Would he belong to a hedge fund? Would he sell short? Would he approve of a system that has allowed the richest 1% to have more financial wealth than the 95% under them combined?

Michael Moore said that there is no getting around the fact that capitalism is opposite everything that Jesus (and Moses and Mohammed and Buddha) taught. All the great religions are clear about one thing: It is evil to take the majority of the pie and leave what's left for everyone to fight over. Jesus said that the rich man would have a very hard time getting into heaven. He told us that we had to be our brother's and sister's keepers and that the riches that did exist were to be divided fairly. He said that if you failed to house the homeless and feed the hungry, you'd have a hard time finding the pin code to the pearly gates.

Wealth is dangerous, Jesus says. It will distort your thinking. It is difficult indeed to have riches and not become attached to them, despite the cost.

Consider the woman that a famous jeweler sat by on an airplane. He tried to be casual about the huge diamond on her finger. But finally he gave in and said, "I couldn't help but notice your beautiful diamond. I am an expert in precious stones. Please tell me about that stone." She replied, "That is the famous Klopman diamond, one of the most original 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."

The seduction of material wealth is as old as Adam. Here is a sentence from "A Letter to the Church of God" written in 1527. A theologian named Schiermer said, "I speak of the nominal Christians in the church. They pray, 'Give us today our daily bread.' But as soon as God gives it to them it is no longer ours, but mine."

Jesus loved this young man. He loved his earnestness, his eagerness, his piety, his honesty. Jesus even loves that the youth knows something is still missing from the equation. "Master, what more must I do to gain eternal life?"

This man is a winner, but here's the problem, he's asking his question of Jesus. This is the same Jesus who says "lose your life if you want to gain it." This man comes with a systematic theology of winning and presents it to a Messiah who holds to a completely non-systematic theology of losing.

Jesus, in his compassion, shows the man that in order to experience his fullness of life he must sacrifice his privilege for the good of the marginalized. Only then will his path be clear to follow Jesus faithfully.

I understood this story better after a recent conversation with my son.. After a year of student teaching, he said that the question he dreaded most from his students was "Do we have to know this?" "Should we take this down; is this important?" "Is this going to be on the test?" The questions told Sean the kids were interested more in the mechanical requirements of tests and grades than in the excitement and knowledge and understanding he wanted to offer. They were more interested in being successful than they were in being enlightened.

The young man's question was similar: "Good Teacher what must I DO?" His real interest was in the mechanics of religion. This first century yuppie believed that there are certain "good deeds" that will make him the teacher's pet; that will get him in good with God....What's on the test?

But Jesus says, stop trying so hard. God's love is steadfast and generous and for eternity. Accept it by opening your arms. Stop hanging on to your possessions. Trust me. Your stuff is getting in your way.

But the youth insists, "What must I Do, Jesus?" So Jesus answers. Keep your heart on things above, really love others as you love yourself, follow my example, set yourself free to truly seek first the kin-dom of God, have faith in God, for God has promised to supply your needs, draw closer to your fellow travelers.

This Gospel is not about the evils of money; it's not about equal distribution of wealth. It's not about communal living or a system of holy socialism. It's about a quality of discipleship, of willingness. Jesus asks, do want this enough to be willing to go to any length to get it? The 12-step programs declare "Half measures availed us nothing."

Not all of you need this lesson. I can name at least a dozen of you who live with minimal possession and maximum service. Many of you already live simply and frugally. You've figured out just what you need to live on and what you can give away. Others of us simply need to decide whether our money works better as an investment, or as a tool for a better world. Some of us have other things we hang on to besides money that get in the way of responding to the call of Jesus.

Because whether we're called to give up all our "stuff" for Jesus or not, we are called to lives of responsible stewardship of our money and possessions, of our time and our talents. We are called to care for the poor, and we are called to follow our one teacher Jesus. Exactly how all these things fit together in our lives will be different for each of us.

But I personally am one that needs this reminder. I have never worked a job for its salary and benefits. But I have certainly wheeled and dealt in investments, stocks and properties. Most of my "stuff" has come from my family, and there are stories and histories attached. I have identity wrapped up in it. But during the past year and a half I saw all my well-planned and hard-fought savings fall in value to under what I'd invested 10 years ago. And I now understand this Gospel text. I have seen the folly of focusing on savings and profits, I have witnessed the impermanence of it all. What was I saving it for? I am now on a crusade to prudently but deliberately re-invest in ministries that need those dollars now. And I am not worrying about my kids inheritance or my future welfare. God has got our backs. I finally got it.

When I first preached this text to you nine years ago, I used an example from that very weekend. Saturday morning my dog wouldn't go out. Finally I had to walk out with him. Then when I offered his food bowl, he still wouldn't go out to the front deck and eat it. I was perplexed. GO ON GUAR, GO EAT. Finally he looked up at me, sort of sighed, and eased down on his side and turned his belly up. My dog understood this Gospel passage today even better than I did! My dog was telling me, yes you feed me and walk me, but I need to know you love me. Scratch and pat me for a while Mum, then we'll eat and walk. The relationship comes first, then the stuff.

This gospel isn't about money. It's about attachment. It's about trust. Some would say its about justice – the struggle of those who have possessions to keep them and of those who lack possessions to get them. But I think, even more, it is about discipleship. How do we follow Jesus? Not perfectly, but as best we can.

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible. In other words, in the end, we're tossed back into the arms of grace.

" We stand before you, Holy Grace. As you empty our hands of that wealth of unneeded things we cling so tightly to, fill them with your grace and hope. As we let go of all which might hold us back, give us the trust to follow Jesus, into that life with which he offers to each of us."