21 Pentecost/Proper 23 October 14, 2018

All Saints’ Church Year B

Dear Lord, teach us to remember our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. Amen

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 Hebrews 4:12-16

Psalm 90:12-17 Mark 10:17-31

Last week, I preached about the importance of understanding the tone of a passage when interpreting scripture. In last week’s readings, the religious scholars who came to speak with Jesus and to ask him a question came to ***test him with closed hearts***. When they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” they were not asking out of concern for their love or commitment to their spouse. They were not coming with any vulnerability or worry about their promises and their vows. There was no tenderness in their question. Far from it. They were coming to see what they could get away with.

The tone of this week’s gospel passage is the exact opposite. As duplicitous as the religious scholars were last week, this man is sincere. The tone of his question is one that comes out of a desire to be religious, to be a good man of the covenant, to be faithful to his vows.

How can we tell?

He comes running. He kneels before Jesus. He calls him Good teacher. He really wants to know what Jesus thinks. He cares about Jesus’ opinion. He listens carefully to Jesus’ answer and responds that he has kept the commandments faithfully. He wants to be in relationship with this wise teacher.

Let’s pause for a minute over this encounter. I find it interesting that Jesus skips over the first more philosophical commandments like love God, keep the Sabbath holy, and don’t take God’s name in vain. In other words, don’t create false idols; know and believe that God is the only God. The man has made that initial covenant with God, so Jesus focuses on the commandments that center on human to human interactions, face to face.

And the man is quick to say… “Oh, I’ve kept all those commandments all my life, since my youth. I haven’t murdered, committed adultery or fraud. I haven’t stolen or bore false witness. I have honored my mother and father. A list that features a good moral life. Many of us could admit the same type of life lived- a good and moral life.

And yet, something is hurting for this man. There’s an emptiness, or a hunger of some sort, or a desire that hasn’t been met. This moral life is not as fulfilling as he needs it to be. Something is missing, so much so, that he runs and kneels before Jesus to seek help.

And then comes one of my favorite lines in Scripture: Jesus looks tenderly on the man and loves him.

And then Jesus names the gaping pain by which this man is suffering- he’s too identified with his possessions. “Sell what you own, give the money to the poor (which by the way, ***this act of giving*** ***will become your treasure***), and then come and follow me.”

The fact that this faithful man is shocked at Jesus’ answer and goes away grieving, makes his impossibility to act even sadder.

This passage is not about praising poverty or critiquing wealth. It’s not even about giving money to the church (too bad- it’s tempting to make a stewardship sermon out of this lesson!).

This gospel passage is not about money; rather it’s about another reminder of who we really are. We are never defined by our wealth or our successes or even our capacity to be moral. Instead, we are defined ***as rich*** when we stand ***empty*** before God. When we know that Life is only God’s to give. Eternal life, as well, is only God’s to give. We can never earn it.

When Jesus says that it is easier from a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who thinks they are rich to enter the Kingdom of God, he is telling us that getting to Heaven on our own merits, on our own wealth, no matter what form it comes, is impossible.

The disciples are shocked. Someone who has money is assumed to have been blessed by God as “better than.” Why wouldn’t you? With money, you can keep the commandments with more ease. You don’t have to ***defraud*** insurance companies or choose a winter coat for your child ***rather than oil for your parents’ furnace*** or ***steal*** to put food on your plate.

If the rich can’t get to heaven, then no one can. It’s impossible.

That’s Jesus point. This getting to heaven is only in God’s hands. What are we to do?

Stand with open hands placing ourselves before God with a willingness to follow Jesus, as best we can with all of our failings and attempts and offerings.

Or as our reading in Hebrews reminds us: be naked before God. God’s holiness calls us not to claims our virtue, but rather to make confession. And in that confession, judgment will not come from our High Priest, who knows and sympathizes, and even loves our foibles. Our accounting of our lives will be seen through the Throne of Grace, from which comes mercy, especially in any time of need.

Jesus from the throne of grace always looks tenderly upon us and loves us.

When I am in my greatest need, when I am hurting, afraid, anxious, overwhelmed, I try to remember and envision Jesus’ gaze upon me, which is loving, embracing, patient and grace-filled. My demon voices of judgment and ridicule, I lay down at the foot of the cross and try to just take in Jesus’ loving hold.

That’s why it’s so sad when this man walks away. He’s walking away from the gift that will fill the hole inside of him- Jesus’ tender love.

*The Color of Paradise*, one of my favorite films, is by an Iranian filmmaker and is about the celebration of children and the world they live in. The protagonist is an eight-year-old boy Muhammad, who is blind. Even though he struggles with lots of abusive situations, he has no idea that he is not loved. His eternal stance is that he is lovable. It’s so delightful.

One day he is outside in a park, sitting on a bench, and he hears the sharp cry of a fledging which has fallen out of its nest. Muhammad searches and finds the baby bird and then he searches and finds the mother tree. He puts the little bird into his pocket and climbs the tree to put the baby bird back in the nest. And he is successful!

Unbeknownst to him, his father has arrived but rather than love his son’s act, with pride, he is weary and heavy as if he is carrying the burden of his son’s disability. There is no joy.

The father who tries to do his best by his son, is much like Peter in our gospel story, and so much like us, missing the whole point. It’s God who gives life, both now and for eternity. It’s not us on some hierarchy of wealth or health or goodness which “qualifies us.” For God, all things are possible. No matter our blindness, our abuses, our fears, our burdens, our possessions or lack of them, we can live, imagining always that we are loved.

When we see Jesus always gazing upon us, tenderly holding us, then we in turn, even in our blindness, can gaze in love and give in return.

It’s never we, really, who are seeking the Kingdom of God, but rather God who is always seeking us. When we live in the knowledge that God will always finds us, especially when we are out of our nests, we can trust that it will be God who returns us home. With this confidence of always being loveable no matter what, we then, like Muhammad, can become a people who do everything we can to return others to their nests. AMEN