

“When Was the Last Time You Were First?”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “GETTING BACK TO THE HEART OF MISSION”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Mark 10:17-31 [NRSV]

¹⁷As 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?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, 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.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus 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, ³⁰who 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. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Big house, big car, back seat, full
bar.
Houseboat won't float.
Bank won't tote the note.
Too much stuff.
There's just too much stuff.
It'll hang you up,
dealing with too much stuff.
Hangin' out on the couch
puttin' on the pounds.
Better walk, run, jump, swim.

Try to hold it down.
You're eatin' too much stuff,
too much stuff.
It'll wear you down,
carrying around too much stuff.

CHORUS:

Well, it's way too much.
You're never gonna get enough.
You can pile it high
but you'll never be satisfied.

Got hurt, can't work, got a lot o' bills,
But the policy don't pay

'less I get killed.
 Too much stuff. Too much stuff.
 Just my luck, counting on too much stuff.
 Running back can't score
 till he gets a million more.
 Quarterback can't pass.
 Owner wants his money back.
 Too much stuff. Too much stuff.
 You know, you can't get a grip
 when you're slipping in all that stuff.
 Yeah, too much stuff.
 Too much stuff.

There is a part of us that knows that Delbert McClinton's words ring true. His song is titled, "Too Much Stuff." We are often rolling around in too much stuff. I wonder how many other nations have as many self-storage rental units available? Yet as true as they are it is very hard to get rid of all that stuff. Now, before you think I am going to go into a paean to poverty, let me assure you I have no illusions about the romantic qualities of poverty. I tend to agree with the person who said, "I have lived with no money and I have lived with money and I'll take having money over having no money any day." Although none of us may be rolling around in "too much stuff," we may still not like this passage much.

This is a strange passage, not just because we may not like Jesus' prescription of giving away all we have. Jesus is on his way somewhere when a rich, religious man comes up to him and asks, what must I do to inherit eternal life? In typical fashion Jesus answers a question with a question. "Why do you call me good?" It is a strange little debate. Then Jesus tells him that he must

follow the commandments. The other strange thing in this passage is that it lists "you shall not defraud," which is not a commandment at all. It isn't clear why that is in there, either it was kind of a test to see if the man was really listening, or it was written by someone who really didn't know the original Ten Commandments. The other interesting thing is Jesus only lists the ones that have to do with human relationships. He doesn't list the ones that have to do with having no other God, about keeping the Sabbath and in the end he only lists 6, one of which, as I have said isn't even a commandment, of the ten. In any case that isn't our focus.

If we move from the historical setting or our own cultural chains, we have to ask ourselves the theological question. What does this tell us about God? Does it mean God hates rich people or that God thinks riches are evil? You won't hear me say that, nor do I think that is the message here. What it does do is it reminds us that this God we worship loves the "have-nots" just as much as the "haves." It reminds us that this God we claim to love loves the widow, the orphan, the economically fragile and that is a radical and unique claim.

Now the interesting thing is that a lot of people talk out of both sides of their mouths. On one side they will say their wealth is a "blessing from God," while on the other hand they believe that it is a result of their "self-sufficiency," "self-reliance," and "self-superiority" over those who have not. And there is a nasty little trend in America today to demonize the poor. It is as if we are afraid that if being poor isn't the poor's fault then

maybe we are obligated to do something about it and heaven knows we don't want that obligation. What we want to know is what God really wants from us, just like that rich religious man who asked Jesus what he must do.

We want to know what the religious, rich man wants to know. Is there more to life than living by commandments? I say he is religious because he claims to have kept all the commandments from his youth. But he wants to know more. He knows there is something more to life. His desire is so great that Jesus looks at him with love, says the Scripture, and then he drops the bomb. "Go, sell all you own, and give the money to the poor and come follow me."

Well, that's all well and fine, but have you ever tried that at all? We tried it on a small scale once, not out of religious fervor but more out of economic necessity. We wanted to get rid of one of our cars and live with just one car. The only problem was it was a leased car. At that time and with that particular company the only way you could sell the car was to drive to their regional headquarters that just happened to be about 150 miles away, and bring the buyer with you to have them sign the papers. You want to talk about a nightmare of complications? We did it but I learned a lesson about "sell all you have," that day. I don't know if I can give up all my stuff, so how can I ask you to do it? I guess I'll just have to recommend you do what I do – do the best you can and depend on God's grace to do the rest.

Grace proclaims that all of life is a gift of love from God. It believes that if you peel away the layers of "self" you find that it is God who has given us the self that is able to do what it does. To live with out a deep sense of grace robs us of what God defines as real life. We may be able to make a living but we may not be able to make a life worth living.

The heart of mission is giving away our life as a gift to others. Instead of asking the question, "what's in it for me?" or "what do we get out of it," when it comes to mission – that is the wrong question. What we need to ask is what does the other person get out of it and what does God get out of it?

If you doubt God's love for and commitment to those who are poor and economically vulnerable, look no further than Jesus Christ. Kenneth Carder reminds us that, "In Jesus Christ, God comes in vulnerability and poverty. God's special friendship with the poor is not a rejection of the rich, but an affirmation that life is not in riches. Life is in God's grace. It is this grace that gives us identity and worth."¹

Now, let's be honest here. Few of us are in danger of being on any list of Forbes' 500. None of us are dealing with so much stuff we don't have money worries. A lot of us may not be sure what would happen to us if we missed a paycheck or a Social Security check, small as they may be. And when Jesus says the last shall be first, and the first shall be last we have to wonder, just like those disciples, what the heck? Here we

¹ Kenneth L. Carder, *Christian Century*, Sept. 24-Oct. 1, 1997 p.831, the Christian Century Foundation.

are – few of us have ever finished first at anything. Okay, maybe you won a foot race against the fat kid in the neighborhood – that was me by the way – but most of us are somewhere in the middle aren't we? I'm wondering, what about us Jesus? If the last shall be first and the first shall be last what about those of us muddling along in the middle?

Well, I guess the good news is that God loves us middle of the road folks just as much as God loves the first and the last. But let me add something else. I like the way one person put it when he said, we can have too much stuff and not enough life. I think grace is about adding life. I think we experience grace when we give something of our selves to someone else that not only changes their lives but changes ours. We may not be able to give all our stuff away, but we can give our hearts away as an act of love, as an act of grace.

I was struck this week while listening to the sports talk station. Tom McManus is a former Jaguar player and now has a daily radio show. He was talking about how he was giving a speech at a high school and it was one where a lot of the students don't graduate. As part of his speech he urged the students to make a commitment to themselves right there and then that they would graduate from high school. He told them that if they did that and stayed true to themselves they would have a much better chance of success in life. It isn't a revolutionary or new concept to any of us, and maybe not to many of those students. But afterwards one young woman came up to him and she was wearing a t-shirt. She asked Tom to sign

it and asked him to date it because she didn't want to ever forget that day. What he had said had made a difference in her life. But listen to what he said too: he said, "I'll remember her and her words for the rest of my life." She made that kind of difference in his life because he offered her something from his life.

I think that is what is at the heart of mission. If you are going to give something from your life to someone else's life then it will make as much of a difference in your life as in theirs. I am not sure what it takes to be first or last. I figure I am somewhere in the middle of the middle. But I do know that if we give our heart to something or someone that that is an act of grace. I believe that God honors every act of grace because I believe that God's amazing grace just works that way. I may not be able to give up everything I have to follow Jesus, but I hope that if I can keep giving my heart to something or someone then God's grace will take care of the rest. It is possible to have too much stuff, but it isn't possible to have too much grace. AMEN.