

“The Last First”

(Mark 10:23-31)

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Last Sunday Pastor Mueller told us about the rich young man. The rich young man’s **question** to the LORD revealed his problem, “what must **I do** to inherit eternal life?” (St. Mark 10:17) Our Savior’s answer was loving, designed to reveal his problem: he was insisting on relying on his own ability. He was proud, like us. Realizing his inability to part with his riches, he went away sorrowful (he did not want to let go of what he insisted was *his*) – but what is *ours*? *What illusions of possession do we maintain? What will we take with us from this earth?* -- But Pastor Mueller reminded us that we don’t know the rest of the story...it may have been that the LORD’s words sunk deep into his heart to eventually lead him to turn away from what held him captive and to follow Jesus instead, the One in Whom all that is good resides. Indeed, we should rather give up our own lives so that we may have Jesus.

The whole scene was still hanging in the air and “Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, *‘How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.’*” (v 23) When the disciples heard this, they were “amazed.” (v 24) They were absolutely amazed because the popular rationale was that those who were rich were *especially* blessed by the Lord, so – as reason would dictate – if it is *difficult* for the rich to enter God’s kingdom, then what of the ordinary man? Could this be true? If it is, then what hope is there for the rest of us? [this was the thought-line of the disciples]. Was Jesus *really* saying what they thought they had just heard Him say?! V 24 and 25 continues to verify their great concern: **“But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.’”** And with this further elaboration from the LORD, the disciples were “exceedingly astonished” (v 26) and said to the LORD, “Then who can be saved?” (v 26)

In all of this the disciples prove to us that the rich young ruler is no aberration. He is not at all unusual or exceptional. He also represented the disciples. He also represents us. When we realize that we are stuck on ourselves; we then take the next step and peer deep into ourselves including our love for things that turn to dust, what is left? Sadness. Depression. The rich young man walked away sorrowful “for he had great possessions.” (10:22)

Just like you and me. We too have great possessions. So no, this just isn’t about your 401K, your stocks and bonds, and bank accounts, because we all have “great possessions” in the form of whatever we hold dear in this world. And these vary from person-to-person.

The disciples who were basically like the rich young ruler, also represent us. God gives this Word to show us our nature. It is universal human nature. We live with the presumption of righteousness, the assumption that our lives are in our own hands.

We view the ball as in our court and we like it that way. We continue to be infatuated with the idea that we are masters of our own destiny; the masters of our own universe. We like the old Billy Joel song, "I don't care what you say any more, this is my life! Go ahead with your own life, leave me alone!" Whose life? Who gave Billy life? Was it Billy? Whose life is "your life"? Did I give myself life? But the presumption is that since this is my life, I fix it, I improve it, I renovate it, I hone it, I increase it, I make it good, salvific, fulfilling, etc. This is the idea of "We must do." After-all this is my life! "I must do for my own life!" We can't break out of this thinking. It is stuck to us like our molecular constitution and it is killing us. Because no matter how we pretty it up and pour perfume on it, we're dying. And this – in itself – is depressing. Depending on himself, the rich young man could walk away in no other way.

And our LORD's words are crushing: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person [or to the disciples' ears: "an especially blessed person"] to enter the kingdom of God." (v 25) What?! That means it is IMPOSSIBLE to enter the kingdom of God for ANYONE! And the disciples were left as we are left – with this sadness of inability – what are we to do?

But there it is again right? The insistence upon the question, "What are we to do?!" Do you see the problem? Do you hear sin's voice? Do you perceive the rut? "What are we to do?"

St. Augustine once prayed over this awful allure and tendency: *"Such, O my soul, are the miseries that attend on riches. They are gained with toil and kept with fear. They are enjoyed in danger and lost with grief. It is hard to be saved if we have them, and impossible if we love them; and scarcely can we have them, but we shall love them inordinately. Teach us, O Lord, this difficult lesson: to manage conscientiously the goods we possess and not covetously desire more than you give to us."* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, N.T. II: Mark, p. 145)

This prayer is answered in Jesus when He comes to help those overcome by their inability. "Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man it is impossible, but not with God.'" (v 27) What marvelous news: what is impossible for me is not with my Savior! And "the more all hope in ourselves dies...the more our hope in God...rises." (Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel, 443) But Peter couldn't stop his natural-man-DNA reaction and wanted to compare what *he had done* in comparison to the rich young man. "Peter began to say to him, 'See we have left everything and followed you.'" (v 28) Again, it was that reflexive reaction: *"Look at what I have done!"*

Peter would continue to reside in the battle, just like you and me. It never ends on this side of heaven. But what is important to see here was the compassion of our Savior. Back at vs. 24 Jesus calls his disciples “children,” and reveals His love and tenderness for His disciples. And even when Peter spoke up revealing his need to do, the LORD begins to describe what in fact He – the LORD – does in and through His people. Here, the LORD is describing a new life, a different life: the life of Jesus who came to save the rich young man, the first disciples, you and me.

These – the baptized like you and me – are now described as possessing the life of God that is motivated by two things and are willing by the grace of God to claim new priorities in life, a life that rests on the author of life, the LORD Jesus...this is His new life that has been given to you in Holy Baptism and in the Holy Eucharist:

1. This new life is lived as Jesus said (referring to our living for Him), “for my sake (v 29).” Here the motivation is for one’s own faith and salvation. Here, our desire has shifted. And while there is nothing wrong in and of itself for one to have riches – consider Abraham, David, Joseph of Arimathea, Zacchaeus, and Lydia – what changes is that worldly riches no longer own your heart. The world no longer possesses you. Your joy is no longer defined by the world. You don’t need that car for your joy to be complete (though you might certainly enjoy it); you don’t need that recognition to be complete (though the LORD might permit you to receive it); and you don’t need what the world needs (though the LORD may permit you to know many of those things...like a good meal which many on this earth are deprived of). But what brings *lasting* joy now is living “for the LORD’s sake”...taking joy in knowing that He has covered your sin by His blood and opened heaven so that death has become for you but a mere door through which you pass to see the glory of God. He forgives you all your sins; He loves you with an unbreakable love; and He lives for you now to keep you in the palm of His hand.

This is a different motivation for joy is it not? While in Texas I was permitted to serve as an adjunct theology instructor at Concordia Lutheran High School, Tomball, TX. I taught seniors preparing for university Christian apologetics and Christian ethics. In one of the opening classes, I asked the students to introduce themselves and to also share what their life-goal was. It was exciting for me to hear about the visions these young Christians held for themselves. Many of them wanted to become doctors, engineers, teachers, and even pastors, but one of them stirred quite the reaction in the class that day. When I got to the young man, he boldly introduced himself and proclaimed – with great vigor and honesty – I don’t care what I do, I just want to be rich. I don’t share this story to pick on the young man. He was speaking for our flesh and what he was brave enough to say out loud was pretty much what I had in my mind when I was his age (but not brave enough to say as he did). And it is an attitude that is the diametrical opposite of living for Christ; not desiring the things of eternal life, but desiring the things that will turn to dust (which is why -- as the old adage says -- you

never see a U-haul following a funeral hearse). But the enemy fights ferociously to keep you from living for Jesus' sake, for the sake of eternal life, for the things you cannot yet see, and he dangles all of the other things, the things that fade; the things you won't care about when it is time to leave this world. He wants to lull you into a spiritual slumber so that you would not hunger or thirst for eternity with the LORD.

A new movie *Steve Jobs* is about the new cultural saint (and here I refer to the image, because I do not know the man; I do not know his heart). But he is depicted as a great man with great successes...he is what so many want to be. There is an implied banner over the movie: "this is life, this is success; this is where it is at." And if anyone buys into this message, beware. The new image of a saint lacks a halo. The new image of a saint does not live for the One who lived for him.

But the One who calls you Christian to live for Him, lived and lives for you. This is not a one-sided proposition. He was rich beyond measure and He gave it all up to love you and to make you rich in the grace of God. He truly lived for you – someone loved you that much – and gave His EVERYTHING for you...now what a pleasure we have to live for Him in return! This is His work in your life.

2. The second motivation of the new life is "for the gospel." Not only do you live for God, but you now live for others that they too would know the love of God in Jesus. You live to spread the Word of Christ. You live to share the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. You live to share Jesus. This is the work that sustains joy as we feel we have so many needs, but there is nothing like being a part of someone discovering the answer to their greatest need, something through which the LORD works to renew our joy.

During my vicarage – when future pastors conduct an internship serving a congregation for one year – I took out outreach teams each week and trained members on how to share the faith. We would focus on visiting guests who had come to worship that prior Sunday. We arrived to the home of a wonderfully kind elderly woman who had recently moved into the neighborhood. She welcomed us into her home and we were genuinely happy to hear about her long history in the Church and her long standing as a dedicated Christian. In the conversation I informed her of what we did on the calls and that on the occasion when we met folks who had never heard the gospel, then we would share the good-news in outline form. She was intrigued and agreed to listen to our presentation even though she was already a believer. I was happy to oblige her and went into the presentation directly. In the middle of sharing the gospel itself, tears came streaming down her face as she heard that Jesus had covered her sins with His precious blood and that eternal life was now hers through the Resurrected LORD. I remember thinking to myself even as I was going through the presentation: "Wow, how this woman really LOVES the gospel message even though she knows it so well; she has never tired of it!" I finished the presentation looking at the woman

who was now full of joy. After a celebratory pause, the woman said to us, “I have *never* heard this message before!” Though she had been in a church for so many years, that church had not shared the gospel with her. But she had heard it and was joyful...I remember leaving that visitation with our church team...we were all rejoicing! We were so joyful for what this woman had heard and received in great joy!

And for one who lives with these two new-life standards: 1) living for Christ and 2) living for the gospel, we find ourselves in a very interesting situation. We who were once dead in sin and without hope (and only in drowning sorrow), who were once “last”...among those *out* of the Kingdom of God, are now by the grace of God “first”...you are now *in*. No, we don’t deserve it, but Jesus does the impossible: He turns hearts once only dedicated to what man can do, into hearts now rejoicing in what only God can do: He saves sinners. He raises the dead. He makes those on the outside members of the Kingdom of God. He makes the last – only filled with sadness over their inability – first, filled with the assurance of faith in the ability of their Savior for Whom nothing is impossible. He takes us last folks once preoccupied with what we do, and makes us first folks, amazed at what Jesus did, and does and will do making you first, keeping you first; the best reason to rejoice!