

August 18, 2019
Jeness Hall
Towson Presbyterian Church
Luke 18: 18-23

God's Security

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen

The story of the Rich Young Ruler shows up in three different Gospel lessons: Luke 18:18-30; Matthew 19:16-27; and Mark 10:17-28. We are to take notice.

We hear in the gospel that a rich young man asks Jesus how he could be assured that he would inherit eternal life. He was a successful young man, having been fortunate in his business dealings. Luke 18: tells us

"he was a man of great wealth, having an abundance of earthly possessions that exceeds normal experience, and a ruler."

He was an observant Jew, living according to the commandments of the Torah, remarking to Jesus that

"Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

So, one wonders why he wanted an assurance from Jesus that he would go to Heaven. He seemed to be sitting on top of the world. What did he feel he was missing?

Then came the shocker! Jesus lovingly told him

"There is *still* one thing lacking; sell all that you own, and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Was Jesus truly asking the Rich Young Ruler to go from a very wealthy, respectable member of the community to what amounts to a beggar – bereft of his wealth and stature? Did he have to give up everything – all those possessions and 'good' things he had worked so hard to accumulate? This was just too much for the Rich Young Ruler; he went away disconsolate and dejected.

You may recall Saint Francis of Assisi did exactly that. Born the first son of a wealthy and privileged textile merchant and landowner, he was destined to inherit the business, the wealth, all the power. As a youth, he was a rowdy drunkard and wanted to become a knight, a man of war. Through several sobering experiences, including a year's imprisonment after being captured in a war against neighboring Perugia, Francis began to change. He kept hearing the call of God telling him to "rebuild my church". Finally, in 1203, in a dramatic confrontation with his

father in the town square of Assisi, Francis took off all his fine clothing, gave them to his father, and walked away to serve the poor and win people to a new vision of the Church.

Clothed only in a wool tunic and sandals, he traveled by foot to villages and towns, caring for lepers, and winning followers for Christ.

Today, should we sell everything that we own and give it to the poor just to assure that we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven?

Perhaps we should look at this teaching in light of the culture of today.

We have accumulated things in our lives that make it comfortable for us and our families and friends. We want to assure that those within our circle have every need that they require, so that their lives will be secure and comfortable, and they can achieve those things they want in their lives.

But, if we sell everything and give aid the poor, wouldn't we be abandoning our families and friends, shirking our responsibility as parents and citizens?

What does Jesus mean by 'everything' in this scripture? We automatically think He means all of our worldly possessions in exchange for our heavenly reward. Should we become like Saint Francis?

Many people have given up all or most of their "riches" and gone to live in simplicity to serve others. Mother Theresa, Gandhi, and the 20th century American social activist Dorothy Day come to mind. Most of us are not going to follow that path. I don't believe Jesus means for us to do that.

Let me tell you a story. For the past two Januarys at Towson Presbyterian, we have distributed Epiphany Stars. An Epiphany Star has just one word on it such as "love," "joy", "prayer", "discipleship", "commitment."

The goal is to keep your Epiphany Star word near you and see how it unfolds in your life during the year; to reflect and pray on how you grew in regard to your Epiphany Star word. We were instructed not to peek into the Epiphany Star basket when we took our personal star.

I cheated.

I looked.

I grabbed "SECURITY" – because I was absolutely sure that was what I needed in 2019. Security. What type of security? I thought I had thought about all types – financial, creature comforts, relationships. As the months went by, I'd look at my Epiphany Star and wonder, "What the heck is going on? This isn't working!"

As I approached this sermon, I pondered my Epiphany Star and got pretty bummed. The next moment, it was if a cloth had been ripped from my eyes, and I realized I was like the Rich Young

Ruler! I was putting all my hopes and dreams into mortal/material security – I'm not as rich as he was, yet I live in the first world with many material gifts.

My definition of “security” hasn't been working for more than half of the year.

What needed to change? I realized that I WANTED security on my terms and didn't know what I really needed.

I needed – and wanted – an expanded definition of security. And expansive security of God. A spiritual security.

To rely on God, not myself, not wealth or material security, but expansive security.

Maybe Jesus is really saying that we should rid ourselves of those things that do not bring 'goodness' and positive attachments in our lives.

We all have habits, behaviors that we know are not good for us; frivolous, unnecessary; let us consider that these are the 'things' we can rid ourselves of. As I made my first list for the first time in a very long time, it was humbling and hard to do.

I think the story of the Rich Ruler in today's Gospel is a teaching tool to help us learn what it truly means to follow the way of Jesus.

For me, it means to be willing to put the teachings of Jesus first – to put into practice every day, putting the love, compassion and service to everyone – not just friends and family and colleagues – but everyone: all races, all economic levels, strangers, people I do not understand or think I don't like – EVERYONE!

This is hard work, there's no doubt about it.

Perhaps if we ask God what we need when it comes to spiritual security, the answers will reveal themselves.

I've realized through my Epiphany Star “Epiphany” that I will find spiritual security by being close to God – asking what God wants in my life.

These are things that we can do something about by re-evaluating our priorities. There is a distinct difference between what we actually 'need' and what we 'want'. Addressing our 'needs' and using our time, treasures and talents from those resources which were our 'wants' to contribute to the welfare of others will go a long way toward fulfilling Jesus' admonition in this scripture.

But let me remind you of something else, the Good News is not about money or worldly security: Salvation is not determined by what we've given up for God, but what God has given up for us. We are not saved by our tithes, but by our ties to Jesus. That is good news. It's called grace, amazing grace. We have not given all we could, but God has given enough for everyone.

The Rev. Anne Marie Richards wrote last week, “Like so many of us, I want to renew my soul, I desire to release my anxieties and fears, and to embrace change, embrace surrender to God’s will for me. And yet, it is messy. I have to work at it, and I can’t just slack off and wait to see what happens. My soul will not gleam again until I’ve done a little spiritual refinishing.

“Luckily, the transformation of our lives more and more into the image and likeness of God is joy-filled work. We are given infinite do-overs, we don’t have to get it right the first time. Our God is a God of mercy, of hope, of love.”

That is what I hope and pray for all of us – the spiritual security that comes from our God of mercy, hope and love. With God’s help, I urge you to reflect to discover what in your life are perceived “wants” and ask God for expansive, spiritual security on the journey.

You and I are rich in many ways. Christ isn’t calling us to give up everything to follow him. What matters most of all is not what we do for God, but what God has done for us. God has given God’s own Son for eternal life now and in the future . . . for all of us.

I leave you with some of the words attributed to Saint Francis:

Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,

To be understood as to understand,

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen