

Christ Episcopal Church  
 Dayton, Ohio  
 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 23B  
 October 11, 2009

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” asked the man who ran up to Jesus. And Jesus responded with some of 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.”

It’s worth noting two things. First, that “You shall not defraud,” isn’t one of the big 10. In the Greek Bible the verb translated here as *defraud* means the act of *keeping back the wages* of a hireling. The reference is about *economic exploitation*.

Jesus’ response was to tell the man to pay attention to the commandments, especially those commandments that have to do with maintaining the health—the vitality—of the neighborhood. As Walter Brueggemann says, the last six commandments make the neighborhood safe from theft and murder, enhance family integrity, and curtail gossip and greed. To which the man responded, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

The other thing that Jesus affirms is that only God is good. You may not have any egregious sins in the book of your life, but as good as you are, it’s not good enough to earn your way into eternal life. “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.”

“Follow me.”

What a difficult thing it is to follow Jesus. Just look at him. Born in a stable, raised in a small town off the beaten path, baptized by a wild man, driven into the wilderness, followed by a ragtag group of Galilean peasants who rarely understood him and who abandoned him in his hour of need, and in his last hours endured capitol punishment. “Come, follow me,” he says.

What can I do? I want to inherit eternal life? Show me the way.

“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go thru the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible . . . .”

The larger point here is that eternal life cannot be earned. How do I inherit? It’s not about strategizing, conniving to position oneself in order to get into the good graces of the Father—so that you’ll be remembered in the will. One inherits simply because one is a child of God.

The problem with wealth . . . money wealth, spiritual wealth, educational wealth, wealth of IQ, wealth in ego, wealth in virtue and righteousness . . . the problem with wealth is that when we have something out of the ordinary . . . we tend to think that we did something grand. Hey world, look at me, my ability, my skill, my wisdom, my widget, my acumpucky . . . my *whatever* is better, shinier, broader, faster, more remarkable, glitzier than anyone else's. The more wealth I have, the more difficult it is to be humble, the more tempting it is to believe that it's all a result of my own effort, and the less sense that all I have is a gift.

So if wealth doesn't get you saved—and if virtue and faith aren't enough for eternal life, then what? Basically, to worry or focus on my salvation is just another form of self-centeredness. It's a preoccupation with what's going to happen to me. Jesus invites us, instead, to give our attention to God and to our neighbor . . . especially the neighbor who is poor, un-wealthy. "Give away your wealth and follow me," he says. "Take care of your neighbor and walk in my footsteps."

And those footsteps are those of one who was willing to empty himself . . . willing to be one for others.

Along Interstate 70 between here and Columbus is a large sign that asks, in effect, "If you die tonight, where you will spend eternity?" We hear the question in some form or another all the time. But Jesus says it's a selfish question—because it's a question about me.

- Better that we ask where some of God's children are going to spend the night tonight, now that the temperatures are dropping and the utilities have been shut off?
- Better to ask where God's children are going to get healthcare today when their fevers spike and their flu goes into pneumonia and their mom has no money to buy the acetaminophen?
- Better to ask where our neighbors are going to find a meal when the food bank's shelves are bare?
- Better to ask what we can do to teach Johnny and Sally to read?
- Better to ask what we can do to make sure that God's children have clean air to breathe and safe water to drink?
- Better to ask what needs to happen so that they can play safely at the neighborhood park, grow up in a world where there are jobs, affordable housing, and a shot at life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- Better to ask how I can better follow Jesus and to give God the glory.

And you're worried about your eternity?

Jesus instructions to the man's question can be summarized in this way: "Love God . . . love your neighbor. Leave eternal life to the Eternal One."