

*This sermon was preach by the Rev. Dn. Mark LaGory on  
Sunday, October 11, 2009*

## **Already?**

Let us pray. “Lord, you look us in the eye and with great love invite us to follow you. Give us the wisdom and the courage to make that journey.”

After a rather lively poetry reading one evening, someone from Maya Angelou’s audience raised their hand to ask a question. Angelou nodded toward the woman in recognition, the woman stood up, and in a disapproving tone asked: “Ms. Angelou are you a Christian?” Pausing for a second, the poet turned the question back on her inquisitor--- “Madam are you?” The person replied, “Why yes, of course!” Angelou paused, smiled and with feigned surprise asked: “Already?”

That one word response speaks volumes doesn’t it? You see, Christian faith isn’t about being in the club or being out of it. It is about a relationship, a faithful journey with God and neighbor. It’s about our life at work, at home, and in the streets of our cities, just as much as it is about our time together in this beautiful sanctuary. Jesus challenged his followers to take up their crosses and follow him; that is why early Christians called themselves “the way”. Christian living is about the here and now, and not just membership in Club Salvation.

The theme of faith as journey is center stage in today’s gospel. A rich man runs up to Jesus and excitedly asks: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus answers first by offering a summary of the commandments concerning our relationships with one another. “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 your mother.”

The man responds with confidence, “but teacher I’ve done that”. Jesus looks him in the eye and with great love delivers a zinger that only a best friend can, “You lack one thing,” Jesus says, “go, sell what you own, give it all to the poor and then come follow me.” Jesus speaks the truth in love, as the man’s heart sinks. You know what happens next. The text says that when the rich guy hears this, he’s shocked, and he goes away grieving. Jesus didn’t give the right answer; he didn’t give the answer any of us want to hear. After all, this fellow was upright, he had achieved a lot. By society’s standards he was a good man, someone of influence and standing.

Jesus speaks an inconvenient truth for the faithful. Obeying the law is nice, it’s important. But it isn’t enough. The commandments tell us what we shouldn’t do, but being faithful requires more than just simply staying out of trouble.

A few weeks ago, I heard an interview on NPR with Stephen Black, the grandson of former Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black. Black runs an organization called Impact Alabama

that offers service learning projects for students at UAB and the University of Alabama. Most of the students do their projects in poor neighborhoods and schools. Black describes Impact Alabama's mission as teaching students to live ethically in their communities. The interviewer asked Black what he meant by teaching ethical living? He said that living ethically means more than just living a lawful life. Avoiding jail, is not ethical living. Ethical living, he said, means giving something positive back to your community. To be a responsible citizen is to live soulfully in community. There is gospel truth here. And we can't dilute it by referring to this part of our faith as the "social gospel." The gospel is the gospel, it can't be divided into its parts without killing it. God isn't an "either/ or God", our God ask us to be "both/ and". We can't love God, without loving our neighbor. And just as surely we cannot fully love our neighbor without loving God. It is all one and the same. If you don't believe it, when you go home today reread those powerful words from Amos and Mark. Faith is not a destination or a club, it's a journey, a complex relationship between God and God's creation.

For those of you who knew John Claypool it's hard not to refer now and again to his stories. I'm not very good at telling jokes, because I always forget the punch line, but John told one joke from the pulpit that's stuck with me. It seems that there was an old rabbi who had faithfully served an inner city synagogue for many years. Neither the rabbi nor his flock were well off, and the rabbi was very concerned about his retirement and the future of his congregation. Every evening at the end of the workday he would kneel in his office and pray, and at the end of every prayer he would add this petition, "Lord I am a poor man, my congregation is poor, help me win the lottery". Several years went by, but God never answered the rabbi's petition. Yet day after day the rabbi ended his prayers the same way, "Lord I am a poor man, my congregation is poor, help me win the lottery". Then one day as the rabbi ended his prayers with the same old petition: "Lord I am a poor man, my congregation is poor, help me win the lottery" a bright light suddenly appeared, and a booming voice came from the light: "Moshe, give me a break....buy a ticket!"

Living faithfully means more than just avoiding "the occasion of sin." It means buying a ticket, it means fully participating in the journey. Living faithfully involves more than waiting for God to act in the world, it means participating in God's dreams and hopes for the world. And how are we supposed to do that? What are we to do? How are we to live rich spiritual lives? Jesus' answer seems countercultural. He asks us to turn everything we know upside down. Be poor he says to the rich young man, then you can follow me. Does that make any sense at all? Our culture tells us that to live richly and well, we must **be** rich and well.

What can Jesus possibly mean then when he says: "It 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?" How can we dig below the hyperbole Jesus uses in this encounter to get to the "gospel truth"? How can we embrace poverty as a way to God when every one of us wants to be rich? What's the value in it for us? I think the answer is simpler than it seems. I've said it before because it is my own

personal experience: **We humans are most open to God not when we are at the top of our game, but when we are at the end of our rope.** It's moments when life seems out of control that we turn to God for help. We love the illusion of being in charge, being in control and so we like to feel powerful rather than powerless. Yet it is this very love of power that gets us into trouble spiritually. It is the lure of power that often keeps us from God.

I know Rich likes to hold onto the fantasy that I was a hippy in another life, sure I had a beard and long hair, but a hippy? Honest nothing could be further from the truth, but let me just stoke that fire for a second. I saw a quote the other day from Jimmy Hendrix, the fellow whose chaotic rendition of the Star Spangled Banner at Woodstock made him famous. Hendrix once said that: "the world will know peace only when the power of love overcomes the love of power." That resonated with me. It seems to reflect a deep spiritual truth. Indeed I think it is why Jesus invited the rich man to embrace poverty, and why he turned the world upside down in his Sermon on the Mount.

The great truth in each of our lives is that everyone of us has a place of poverty, a place where we feel especially vulnerable and helpless, a place that we prefer to avoid because it makes us feel **powerless**. Poverty takes many forms. Maybe it's a money problem or a health problem, a lack of a loving partner, a lack of security or safety, a lack of confidence, or a lack of emotional stability. Whatever it is, it is a place we would prefer not to dwell. Yet many spiritual writers from Nouwen, to Peck and Chittester insist that it is also one of the most likely places that we will find God—in our weakness, in our struggles. This may sound strange, but this personal poverty, whatever it is, is sometimes the land where our treasure is hidden. It is the connecting place where we can love both God and our neighbor in utter humility; the place where spiritual connections are made.

It is those times when we are not afraid to confess our poverty that we are able to be with other people in theirs. For just as we try to avoid our poverty, we also prefer ignoring everyone else's. We shudder at the disabilities and deformities of others, we are afraid to see weakness. We prefer not to see the suffering of the destitute. It makes us uncomfortable. It reminds us of our own weakness. We stay away from helplessness, brokenness and neediness. It could be catching. But when we avoid it, we avoid contact with the very people through whom God manifests God's self.

We are enriched in the presence of the poor. They have a treasure to offer precisely because they cannot return our favors. By not returning the favor, they offer us transformation. We become generous and free from the need for repayment and the need for power and control. At that moment the power of love overcomes the love of power. And at that moment we come to another truth, **we are truly powerless to save ourselves.**

We really need to hear Jesus' words today. We need to have them sink deeply into the very soul of our country and our churches. At a time when greed consumes Wall Street, ravages families and neighborhoods with foreclosure, bankrupts retirement accounts, and leads to the highest unemployment figures in nearly 30 years, Jesus offers eternal truth. He gives us a loving glance, and like only a good friend can do, he challenges our very way of life, with its deep-seated individualism, its cherished "can-do" independence, and its notion that greed can be a motivator for good. If we continue to believe these things, the only reaction to times like these is fear, and we've seen over the past few months what that can bring-- angry mobs, ugly signs, and guns brandished in public places are all signs of fear. Name calling, scapegoating, and heartless selfishness becomes the order of the day.

We have forgotten that we mortals cannot save ourselves -- not through wealth, not through the letter of the law, not through "doing" anything. As individuals we are powerless to save ourselves. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for us to inherit the kingdom by ourselves.

And yet once we get that, once we begin to live that truth in good faith we begin true Kingdom Living. Jesus says we get a glimpse of the kingdom now and again when we embrace our poverty, and go to meet our brothers and sisters in need. He says we see His face in the faces of the poor.

We will soon be welcoming several Birmingham Hospitality Network families back to share our church home. A whole host of volunteers now led by Kim Kimberlin have done a terrific job with this program, and the families have given us so much in return. Our children have played with theirs, we've eaten meals and ice cream together, we've helped with homework, we've celebrated triumphs, we've grieved losses. Through it all they've shown us love and gratitude and it has warmed our hearts.

But they have also taught us about poverty, and how hard it is to overcome. We have seen some families move from homelessness into neighborhoods that offer little comfort or protection for their children, because at the end of the day they are still poor, still working in low wage jobs, still struggling to stay healthy and safe. Poverty is tough. It often takes the young too early, it often malnourishes body and soul. And yet the people we have come to know, more often than not, do not let fear overcome a deep faith that all can be well. There is joy in their children's faces and it is infectious. We meet each other in humility as friends, not as rich and poor, but as fellow travelers on a journey to only God knows where. And that is the hope isn't it? Welcome to the way.