

**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 14, 2018**  
Mark 10:17-31

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Grace to you and peace from God our creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church council had a retreat last weekend. We do this once a year to take some time to talk about big picture question and to strategize about ways to enhance our mission as a congregation of Christ's church. We've been looking at some studies by the Pew Research Center recently, which tracks trends in the American religious scene. One study from several years ago looked at the decline in religious affiliation in the U.S. in recent decades. I've mentioned this in at least on sermon recently. But the most recent study asked people who do attend religious services of any kind, *why* they attend. And the top answer was, "in order to get closer to God." More than 81% of respondents said that this was a very important reason they attended. The next most popular reasons were to give their children a moral foundation, to become a better person, and for comfort in times of trouble or sorrow. So let me ask you. You're a target audience for this survey. Take a moment to ask yourself, "Why do I attend church?" And you can have more than one reason.

If one of your answers is, "in order to get closer to God," then I think that's great. And I'm right there with you. But at the same time I also have to say this: be careful what you wish for. I've been teaching a course for our Central/Southern Illinois Synod this fall on the Lutheran Confessions, those writings of the Lutheran Reformers from the 16<sup>th</sup> century that grappled with the central affirmations of the Christian faith. We've been talking a lot recently about the nature of faith, what it is and how we get it. And just this past week I posted a link to a 2015 interview on NPR's Fresh Air program hosted by Terry Gross. The interview was with Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber, the founder of a congregation out in Denver called House for All Sinners and Saints. You've heard me talk about her before. In fact, when we visited our son out in Denver last summer we attended church there and heard her preach. I talked about that sermon the Sunday after we got back. At any rate, I posted this interview because it has some particularly good sections in it about what the church is, what a pastor's job is, and what faith is all about. But one part of that interview seems particularly appropriate to this Pew survey I just mentioned and the desire to become closer to God. Pastor Nadia recounted a question and answer session at which an earnest young seminarian asked her what she did personally to get closer to God. And her response was, "What? Nothing. Why would I want to do that? Half the time I wish God would leave me alone. Because if I'm going to try to get closer to God, I'm going to have to end up loving someone I don't like, or give away more of my money, or be confronted with some horrible inconsistency about myself and be called to repent." I think this is particularly insightful. Her point was that her experience of faith is not that she has to seek God out, but that God is constantly coming after her, hunting her down. She understands that getting close to God means being called upon to change, and she's honest enough to recognize that at some deep level she doesn't really want to do that. That none of us do.

This is certainly the experience of the rich young man who gets close to Jesus in today's Gospel reading. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks Jesus. "Inherit" is probably not the best translation here. It really just means, "how to I get it?" "What do I need to do so that it will come to me?" It's really the wrong question, as I hope my confirmation students recognize. (What do *I* need to do to get eternal life? Nothing. It's not about what *you* do. It's about what God does. You knew that, right?) So it's the wrong question, but Jesus plays along. "You know the commandments..." And then he rattles off a few. And the young man likes this answer.

“Excellent! I’ve done that. I’ve kept all of the commandments since birth!” Then Jesus does his best Inspector Columbo impression (I’m dating myself here, you remember Inspector Columbo, right, If you’re my age or older? He was famous for walking out of the room after questioning somebody, and then at the last minute turning around and saying, “There just one more thing.”) Jesus says this to the rich young man. “You lack one thing. Sell what you own and give the money to the poor... and then come and follow me.” But he can’t do it. He has this invitation to follow Jesus, he has eternal life within his grasp, seemingly. But he just can’t do it. He cannot part with what he owns, because he had many possessions.

At On The Way this past Thursday we had a look at this text and at least one person focused in on the fact that before Jesus responded to the man the second time Mark tells us that he looked at him and loved him. This isn’t like Jesus’ encounters with the Pharisees. This isn’t adversarial. Jesus really wants to help this guy out. “He looked at him and loved him.” And I think that when the young man goes away in shock and sorrow, Jesus really is bummed out. “Darn. He couldn’t do it. It’s SO HARD for rich people to let go of their wealth. Almost like they have an addiction to their wealth.” Jesus doesn’t say that, but if this had been written in our time and place he might have.

What Jesus reveals in this little back and forth with the rich young man is that he hasn’t really been keeping the commandments after all. Later in Mark, just two chapters from now, Jesus will sum up the commandments this way: “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” In his Large Catechism, Luther writes that “Anything on which your heart relies and depends... that is really your god.” The rich young man’s inability to sell his man possessions, Luther would say, shows that his wealth is his god.” There goes the first part of the commandments. But the young man also shows by this that he does not love his neighbor as himself either, because he is not willing to share his possessions with those in need.

So he does not, in fact, love God with his whole heart, and he does not love his neighbor as himself. Does that sound familiar? We just confessed exactly that only a few minutes ago. So there we stand, with the rich man. Called out for our self-centeredness, called to reevaluate the way we live, both individually and corporately, call to reassess the vast chorus of voices that shout or whisper seductively about how we deserve comfort and luxury and all the goodies our cash flow will support, voices that tell us that our Christian values are not practical, patriotic, or even very fun. Called, in fact, to repent, to change our attitude and our way of life. And that’s asking a lot. It’s asking us to swim upstream against a very powerful current. It’s asking a camel to go through the eye of a needle. It’s asking us, in a word, to do the impossible. And we might well despair. We might well exclaim with the disciples “Who, then can be saved?”

The good news is *not* that none of this really matters. Because it really does matter, very much. Jesus is not playing games here. He’s completely serious, both about the rich young man and about us. The good news is that he will not give up on us. For God all things are possible. And God is at work in Jesus to free us from our impossible predicament. Jesus is busy trying to turn our selfishness into selflessness, to uncurl us from our turned-in-on-self selves and open us up to God and the world that God so loves in Jesus Christ.

All that is to say that in Jesus, it is God who gets closer to us. And when God gets close to us, our lives are bound to change. So be careful what you wish for! Because by the grace of God it just might happen. Amen.