

The Annual Sermon Guidebook

WORSHIP

and

PREACHING



Messages for the Month of June

What Draws Us to Christ?

Matthew 19:16-20

This is the first of a series of sermons on the rich young man. Though this is a familiar story, it shows us the nature of true Christian commitment. The sermons will follow John Wesley's order of salvation: prevenient or going-before grace that draws us to Christ; saving grace that binds us to Christ; sanctifying grace that unites us with Christ's image; and persevering grace that enables us onward toward Christlikeness. These are not separate graces. All flow from the atonement of Christ. Neither are they chronological. There is a continued presence of "going-before" grace in the lives of those saved; a sanctifying grace in those justified; a persevering grace even in "babes in Christ."

Paul writes to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:9), "This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time." This [morning] we will look at this grace that goes before, and read the story of the rich young man in the light of Psalm 139.

This psalm has been read as a kind of explication of God's omniscience [all-knowingness] (vv.1-6), omnipresence (vv.7-12), and omnificence [all-creatingness] (vv.13-16). But, thankfully, the Psalmist uses more personal terms:

I. God Knows Us and We Know God

God searches me and knows me. He knows when I sit, when I rise, what my thoughts are, when I go out, when I lie down. What does God do with this knowledge? He "hems me in, behind and before." He encompasses me, he rests his hand upon me, he constrains me. He keeps whispering to us which way to walk. We may not always know of or be aware of his surrounding us, but he is still there. That is grace.

What tremendous assurance this is! It is not God's knowledge of abstract physics which astounds us, it is not his ability to know historical facts. It is not that he knows great literature, and has inspired much of it. It is not that his knowledge reaches the outer limits of the universe. It is that he knows *me*. He tells me who I am, and by doing so shapes who I am.

God has always known this rich young man, and has surrounded him, hemmed him in, laid his hand upon him, constrained him.

God also has imparted knowledge of himself to this young man – and to us – through the Scriptures and the Law. It is no small thing. He has

taught this young man what is right and what is wrong. He knows God is just because he demands justice; merciful because he demands mercy; holy because he demands holiness. The Law itself is something holy, merciful, and just. It allows this young man to have a conscience.

The society which God has placed this rich young man within also is a mark of his grace. He has been circumcised (as many of us have been baptized) as a sign of his initiation into a community of faith that has encouraged and nourished his faith, and through which he has personally chosen to live according to kingdom values and standards.

God has laid his hand upon him in some special, unique way. Not by his own works did he become rich – he is too young to have done anything to make himself rich – and this is a symbol of grace. But how is he to use these riches? This rich young man was “anointed,” to use the psalmist’s words, for service. God’s hopes for this young man were much higher than his own aspirations. The young man wanted to be “good”; God called him to be “perfect”!

II. God is Present with us and We are Present with God

“I” cannot go anywhere from “Thou,” (v. 7), the presence of the Spirit. Sometimes I suppose we wish we could get away from his presence, or suppose that we have escaped him. But we have not. “If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” The ancient people sometimes understood that there were two realms inhabited by two gods. But the psalmist understood that God is in the depths as well as in the heights. There is but one God, and “neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39).

Sometimes we too might be prone to think there are realms beyond God’s presence. There are not. His grace is always going before, anticipating, preparing. “If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.” We cannot shake him. He pursues us. He will not let us go.

We might have grown up thinking that by our sin, disobedience, disloyalty, God would give us up. Perhaps we need a bit greater assurance than this. God’s grace is stronger than us. It upholds us. Where sin abounds in our hearts, his grace abounds more. Our hearts sometimes condemn us. Our hearts are filled with guilt. Or our hearts have no feeling at all toward God. But God is greater than our hearts (1 John 3:20). “The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose, he will not, he will not desert to his foes; that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, he’ll never, no

never, no never forsake.”

God has been present with this rich young man in and through his pious family, and his religious community. He has been in the saints who have surrounded him, in the Book read to him. God has revealed everything of himself that this rich young man needs to know for his salvation.

Like many of us, he has been tremendously privileged. God has enabled this rich young man to keep the law from his youth. Any way in which we might live up to it, it is all because of His grace. We are all sinners, we all far short of the law. If this rich young man has been able to do what the law requires, it has been because God's presence has been there enabling him to do so. It has not been by his own strength.

III. God is Creating and We are Creating with God

It started when God knit or wove me – both my “inmost being” and my “frame” – in my mother's womb (v. 13). We are a part of God's creation, just as the stars and the earth, the seas and the skies. We are a part of the weaving of God, a part of God's artistry. Some think of God's dealing with the world as if he were a scientist, experimenting and controlling carefully and completely all of the variables. I think of God more as an artist than as a scientist.

Sometimes I am critical of his art-work, especially as it pertains to me. I do not often rejoice when I look at me in the mirror, or look inside of me. But I have to have faith that I am made as God makes all human beings, in his image.

Though all of us are fallen, by his grace there is something still there in our created being which allows us to respond to God. I guess it does not matter how I look, or what psychoses I carry, so long as I am able to respond to God. It is not that I can respond to God by my own effort, but his grace enables me to respond to him. God saw my unformed body, and knew both what I could become by his prodding and wooing. If there is any goodness in us at all, even if it comes from our createdness, it is still all of God, which is to say, all of grace.

God is still weaving together into something beautiful what is around us and what is within us. He is bringing “all things together under one head, even Christ” (Eph. 1:10). But we see fission instead of fusion, centripetal forces at work rather than centrifugal. We see fragmentation and brokenness in the lives of people.

Conclusion

The young man realized his own brokenness. In spite of all of his religious

training, in spite of his parentage, in spite of his moral goodness, he still lacked something: assurance of eternal life. Grace revealed to him the extent and nature of his need.

He was looking for eternal life. Even if it is simply a sense that we have of our own mortality and finitude that gives us a hunger for immortality, it is by grace. He had kept all of the laws, and he did not have the assurance of eternal life. *Grace* had taught his heart to fear. Others looking at him saw an upstanding, moral, rich, successful young man. His outward appearance deceived them. But, by grace, he was not self-deceived: he saw his wretchedness. He knew his lostness, and that had brought him to Christ.

Grace impelled or lured, or, in some way, summoned him to Jesus. Something in Jesus was winsome, wooing, attractive, drawing (John 6:44, 12:32). So this rich young man was drawn.

From his mother's womb, to a religious family and a nurturing faith community, to standing now before Jesus Christ himself, grace had led him all the way. Through the leading of that same God who had woven him together, who had always surrounded him, he now stood at a point, at a crossroads, vulnerable – asking what good thing he might do to have eternal life. God peers into his heart.

There are two ways, and by grace we are enabled to choose the way we walk in. But it is our decision.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

What Good Thing Must I Do?

Matthew 19:16-22

Last week I was speaking of grace going before. That grace leads us to knowledge of ourselves. Going-before grace leads us to Christ. This morning I want to speak of grace justifying. One way to understand justifying grace is to compare it to alternative ways of justification. So again our attention is back on the rich young man.

He leads us to the question we have all asked: What is the connection between “goodness” and eternal life? To this rich young man there was a natural connection. You do good things or some one particular good

thing and you get a reward – eternal life!

I. Goodness and the Law

He comes to Jesus with respect, calling him “teacher” or Rabbi. He is expecting a rabbinic discourse, to be taught about the Torah or the Good. The Torah taught not just rules but a way of life. It provided the code, as Confucianism did to the Chinese, of social behavior. It also was the means of maintaining the covenant relationship with God, and so was holy. In addition to the Pentateuch, the Torah included 613 precepts of “interpretation.” It was the responsibility of the Levites and priests to teach these. Perhaps the rich young man was asking the same question to them as to Jesus.

Jesus’ response: Why do you come to *me*? What “goodness” do you see in me? Do you see me living by the Torah more completely or fully than the Pharisees or the Levites? They are living by its most minute of rules. If they keep more than 600 rules, do I keep more than 700? Is keeping more rules the way to *life*?

Jesus had angered the Pharisees by allowing his disciples to pick heads of grain and eat them on the Sabbath, and by healing (like he did the man with the withered hand) on the Sabbath. He emphasized that persons are more valuable than sheep (ch. 12).

If, then, “the good” to Jesus transcends the rules of the Torah, what is “good”? Jesus told him, “There is only One who is good.” He echoes the prophets’ radical monotheism: there is only one God. All goodness is derived from God. Only God is good. If we think we are “good” we are deceiving ourselves.

Hear the Psalmist: “Give thanks to the Lord, for *he* is good; his love endures forever” (Psalm 136). Throughout the Bible, God’s goodness is tied to his love.

II. Righteousness and Pride

Jesus has to remind us of this. In a sense he has been defining what righteousness or goodness is throughout all of his ministry, and he contrasts the righteousness he has been teaching and manifesting to others’ expectations.

What is righteousness? It includes the Law. Jesus says, “do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (5:17). Here Jesus says to the rich young man, “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments,” and then he recites several. Jesus affirms the commandments. The Law and the Gospel

are not contradictory.

He says "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt. 5:6). Filled with righteousness. He goes on: "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). How is our righteousness to exceed theirs?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has talked about our guiltiness for murder if we are even angry; the futility of our offerings if we harbor something against our brother; our standing under judgment for adultery if we even look lustfully. He is not talking about laws added to the Pharisees' list, but an interior quality of goodness or righteousness.

To make it clear, soon after the discourse with the rich young man (23:29-30), he wails, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

Could Jesus have been thinking the same thing about our rich young man? On the outside he is perfectly outstanding, the kind of church member every minister would be happy to have. He tithes. He adds prestige to the congregation. Undoubtedly one of the "outstanding young men of Israel." By all of the conventional standards of his society and his religion, he was outstanding.

But on the inside, what did Jesus perceive? Perhaps pride. We all have pride. Pride is at the very heart of our sinfulness, and there are different manifestations of it. Some are prone to pride of power. They love position, ordering people around, or exercising authority. Others are tempted by intellectual pride (which is ignorance of ignorance). There are those caught in spiritual pride. Whatever "I do or say must be right, for I am holy," is the attitude of those caught in spiritual pride. They believe that their religious experiences are superior to others'.

For this rich young man the problem may have been moral pride. He says, after Jesus lists several commandments, (concluding with "love your neighbor as yourself"), "I have kept all of these." He emphasizes all. Centuries ago, Origen questioned this. Can anyone except one filled with moral pride say that he has *always* loved his neighbor as himself? The word for love is agape in verse 19, indicating a self-less love. If he truly has fulfilled this command, why is he still so rich, and why are his brothers and sisters still so poor? It is a sign of the rich young man's self-

deception.

III. Justification and Self-Justification

But then again, if he is so sure of his own righteousness, why this lack of assurance about eternal life? Grace has led him to discontentment with himself. Within, he knows that his own "goodness" is insufficient. Jesus perceived in the young man's attitude a conflicted, divided spirit. On one hand, he knew that he did not have eternal life, and was searching. On the other hand, he was filled with moral and religious pride, which Jesus had to puncture if he was going to get through to him.

Jesus' response destroys the possibility of self-justification: "Go sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." He is asking the rich young man to live not by wealth and material things, not by social standards, but by faith. Give everything else up, so that you are dependent upon no one else but me – not yourself, not your family, not your riches, not anything but me. Yes, you will not know what your future holds. Yes, you will not have many material things. Yes, people may not look up to you. Yes, you may have no authority in this world. Yes, others will look upon you as a fool. But come. Live not by sight. Live by faith. Follow me.

It was not one great last act of "doing" (give everything to the poor), it was self-abandonment that Jesus beckoned toward: GO/SELL/GIVE/COME/FOLLOW. That is, the "one good thing" the man was looking for was not giving everything to the poor, for if he had done it with that kind of self-seeking, selfish motive, it would have been useless. It would have been to get something back for himself. It would not have been agapeic love.

In one of the last teachings of Jesus in Matthew, Jesus speaks of the surprise there will be at judgment. Those who have lived good lives by all of the conventional standards (as right as all of these things might be) like this young man will discover themselves to be "goats." Keeping the laws is not the way into heaven. Those who had not thought of themselves as good, and who had no ulterior motive for doing anything that they did, fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, took in strangers, clothed the naked, visited the prisoners. They did not think of these as meritorious. They were not on the list of ways of getting to heaven. They just came out of love. They are the sheep. Paul put it this way, "even if I give up my body to be burned for others and have not love, it is nothing."

Conclusion

There was another young man, a contemporary of the rich young man, perhaps more intellectual – and as equally filled with moral pride. He

met Jesus not in some rabbinic discourse, but on the road to Damascus. Like the rich young man, he once had put confidence in the flesh. Like him, he was also circumcised on the eighth day. He was a “Hebrew of the Hebrews.” If the rich young man had kept the law from his youth, he even more so. He was a Pharisee. As far as legalistic righteousness was concerned, the rich young man could compare himself to Saul, and each could find the other faultless.

Like this rich young man, Saul was at a crossroads in his life, but, unlike him, Saul decided to give up everything, even if it costed him his life, to follow Jesus. The laws, the good things this rich young man was living by and searching for, Paul (as he called himself after his conversion) came to view as “rubbish.” He lost all things for the sake of gaining Christ. He came to yearn after the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, most poignantly, “FOR IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED, THROUGH FAITH — AND THIS IS NOT FROM YOURSELVES, IT IS A GIFT OF GOD — NOT BY WORKS, SO THAT NO ONE CAN BOAST.”

What Jesus was beckoning this rich young man to was to live a life like that, seeking salvation not by works of righteousness, not by the law, but by grace — for grace and grace alone redeems us.

Be Perfect!?

Matthew 19:16-22

We have talked about grace going before, and grace justifying, and now we turn to talk about grace as perfecting. Jesus posits an incredible challenge to the rich young man: “If you want to be perfect. . .” If Jesus is beckoning him toward it, he must also have made provisions for his reaching it. Jesus is inviting him, and us, to enter another stage of religious development, which is characterized by selfless love.

What does it mean to be Perfect?

Jesus helps to answer this question, for he used the same word in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says (5:48): “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.” How are we to understand this? In what way are we to be perfect as God is perfect?

If Jesus means to say: “be omnipotent as your heavenly Father is omnipotent,” that would be ridiculous. Not only could we not achieve it, our striving for it would make us tyrants and despots. Does he mean

omniscient as our heavenly Father is all-knowing? If we studied unendingly for, say, ninety years at the best universities, we would still be very far from knowing all, and we would have no opportunity to digest or use what we were learning! Is the challenge for us to be all-creating? That also would be nonsense. This could not be what Jesus has in mind. These concepts come from Greek philosophy, which made God impassive, remote, and unmoved.

This was not Jesus' meaning. He was speaking in Hebrew categories. "Perfect" in the Sermon on the Mount, as it is in the charge to the rich young man, is *τελειος*, which means complete or mature. The command is to be mature, or complete as your heavenly Father is complete.

The "completeness" or perfectness of God is related to his essence, which is love, as we see from the context of 5:48. The command is (as Luke would put it), be merciful as God is merciful. He loves enemies as well as neighbors. He causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good, and rain to fall on both. Rain is good, at other times, in excess, bad, but either way it shows no favoritism. Unlike us. We do good things because we want some reward, and love those who return our love. Our heavenly Father loved us when we were rebels and sinners, and still loves the rebels and sinners around us, but we greet only our brothers and sisters. It takes no grace for that. Even the pagans do that. What is supposed to differentiate us from them? Selfless love: greeting those who are not our brothers and sisters, loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us.

Once when I was in Mountain Province a good laymen took me to his potato fields just after a large hail storm. We talked for at least an hour about potatoes. We noticed that his potatoes had been affected just like all of the other potato fields around him, including the potato fields of his non-believing neighbors. They all had been equally damaged. God had allowed the hail to fall on the just and the unjust.

I also learned some lessons about potatoes. One variety of potato matures quite quickly, in about six weeks, as I recall. But it is quickly destroyed when the rains come. Another type of potato takes longer to mature, but when the rain and hail comes, it is not destroyed. In fact this farmer showed me the places where the hail had cut the branches, and in those places new branches already were beginning to grow. In fact the plant, including the potato in the ground, was stronger than before.

God may not protect us from the storms of life, but he can make us stronger in the midst of them. What is in us underground is maturing,

and we are growing stronger.

To be perfect means that we are growing more mature in our love toward others. Despite what life throws out, love in us triumphs. That is what it means to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. To love is to fulfill our created being. Sin prevents love. Without grace we cannot love as God loves. But through grace, we do love, and we are fulfilled as human beings.

A story: Perhaps a farmer brags that he has the perfect carabao. What would he mean? He would mean that the carabao ably, day after day, does what carabaos seem destined to do: plow the rice fields. The same farmer has a chicken, and he brags that he has the perfect chicken. What would he mean? That the chicken consistently lays eggs. These eggs taste about the same as any chicken's, it is true, but the chicken fulfills its destiny by laying eggs, and does what God intended for chickens to do. The farmer does not complain that he cannot put a plow on a chicken. He does not complain that the chicken is useless in planting rice. Likewise, unless he is crazy, he is not going to complain to his neighbors that his carabao does not lay eggs.

The same farmer has a wife. He does not yell at her either for her inadequacy in laying eggs. He does not (hopefully) attempt to harness her to a plow. What he expects of her is unconditional love. This love fulfills her human essence.

To be "perfect" is to find restored in us by grace the image that God first created in us, the image that allowed our fellowship with him, with creation, and with others. To be perfect like our heavenly Father is to be like the Son whom he sent. Perfection is to be like Jesus. It is, in essence, to love God above all else, and our neighbors as ourselves. To be perfect is to be fully human. We cannot be that unless love fills us. Love is what we are created for, and love is what sin destroys.

All of the commands which Jesus recites to the rich young man are related to love. The challenge to the rich young man is, if you want to be fulfilled, if you want to fulfill your destiny, if you want to be the person God created you to be: sell all that you have and give to the poor, and then come, follow me.

What Jesus was asking for was self-abandoning love. He knew what would give this rich young man fulfillment and joy. We read, instead, that this rich young man chose himself over others, and went away sad. Perfect love is the way of happiness, but we try to find it like this rich young man in material things.

This rich young man is the patron saint of our "me" generation. Like him, we are self-centered rather than others-centered. We are a generation in which guilt is wrong, something to be overcome, rather than a means by which God guides. We assure ourselves that there is nothing ungodly about being rich. We are a generation in which "love" no longer requires self-sacrifice. We see others as obstacles to our freedom. We "deserve a break today," although it is difficult to know why. We really do not work harder. Certainly the poor are not "deserving" to be poor, and the rich are not "deserving" to be rich.

If we are "rich" we better beware. It is certainly not a sign of our standing in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus warned his disciples after this encounter with the young man, it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven. That surprised them because they were caught up with the idea many people even today have about riches, that it is a sign of God's blessing. A person who is rich must be favored by God, some think. Quite the opposite.

We sing "Jesus loves me, this I know," and though this truth gives us assurance about the love of God, sometimes it might promote selfishness, unless we also sing: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white they are [all] precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world."

This is to say that we should be careful about rationalizing away all of the literal meaning of Jesus' demand. We remember that a young rich man in Assisi in the 12th century took this story literally, and his love and zeal changed the world. To monastic orders that had grown materialistic, he redefined the conception of holiness as self-abandoning love.

Our grandparents took off their jewelry and laid them on altars. I used to think that was a rather legalistic act, and assumed that they related holiness to plain-lookingness. Then I realized that they took off their jewelry in order to keep churches open, their pastors fed, and the gospel advancing. They were not at all confused about holiness. They were living simply for the sake of others. Their plain-livingness is not an embarrassment, but something we should laud and emulate.

Following Christ means self-giving. The disciples, as they somewhat proudly told Jesus, had given up everything. And Jesus confirms it: we might have to leave family, houses, and fields, for his sake. But we will gain eternal life. In all of the eyes of the world we might be looked upon as "losers." Last-placers. But in the eyes of God everything is turned

upside down. Those who have left everything are the victors, the “top-notchers.”

Conclusion

Jesus beckons us on into a certain way of life, not simply to make a “decision” regarding the lordship of Christ in some abstract or “spiritual” way, but to live for him and for others as God intended for us to live, and in ways that fulfill our own essence, in love.

Come, Follow Me

Matthew 19:16-22

In a newspaper column a Jesuit priest wrote about a question often posed by evangelicals, “Do you accept Christ?” Following a positive response comes the assurance that “if in your heart you accept Jesus Christ, you are saved once and for all.” If someone prays this prayer, he or she is saved. The priest questioned this. Is salvation really that easy? The priest brought up Jesus’ words: “You will live in my love *if* you keep my commandments, even as I have kept my Father’s commandments and live in his love.” Christians become “worthy” of Christ’s love by obeying him, the priest wrote. Friendship with Christ is a long, difficult process, not an “instant salvation.” It is a radical laying down of our lives, “a dying to every limelight we are basking in at the moment; a poverty of spirit which entails a giving up of possessions; of everything the heart has coiled into like a serpent, a dependency on Christ without whom we can do nothing.” He ended his column with reference to a Filipino Jesuit trainee who had recently given his life in Cambodia, falling on a hand grenade being lobbed in the midst of a technical school for the handicapped where he was working.

Where are we in this? Are we with our evangelical brothers and sisters who make of conversion simply “acceptance” of Christ? The person does not have to “feel” it, but only claim it. They do not need to live it either, since to do so would be tantamount to works righteousness. Like the priest, I have a difficult time with this. On the other hand, I disagree with him that we can ever do anything that would mark us “worthy” of God’s love, because our salvation comes solely and completely through the atonement of Jesus Christ and not our own righteousness.

We have talked about grace preceding us, enabling us to come to Christ; about grace (not works) justifying us; and about grace leading us on into perfect love. This Sunday, we want to talk about grace for discipleship,

not "grace for dying," but "grace for living" the Christian life.

We are back to the rich young man. To him, Jesus does not say, "accept me." Rather, he commands, "follow me."

These are the exact same words he used when he called the first disciples, Peter and Andrew (Matt. 4:19). He tells them to leave their fishing at the Sea of Galilee: "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately, they left their nets and followed him. They did not leave so much in material things as Jesus called upon the rich young man to do, but it was not easier for them to give up their home, their family, their livelihood, and their anticipated future, to venture off into the unknown with Jesus. Peter himself sees the parallel (19:27), declaring, "We have left everything to follow you!" Undoubtedly he is remembering the day almost three years before when Jesus had spoken these words to him.

Jesus intends to make disciples: ones who would follow in his footsteps, live as he lived, feel as he felt about life and people, value what he valued. There were other rabbis with their followers. If the rich young man follows, he will have to follow him as Lord. Jesus requires radical obedience and demonstrated, sacrificial love for others. If he was unwilling to make that kind of commitment to Christ at the beginning, what kind of follower will he be? Half-hearted, living in the world as well as in the way of Christ.

He says, "follow me." The young man could easily have confessed his sins, prayed a "sinner's prayer." He thought he had few sins to confess anyway. He could have mouthed the words of confession or asked for Jesus' acceptance, and not have had any change of heart. What Jesus is demanding here is neither to make the right motions nor to assent intellectually to creeds. What he is demanding is a new way of life.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (5:23-24), "if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar, go and reconcile with your brother, then come and offer your gift." It is easy enough to go through the outward rituals, but what Jesus is demanding is a change in our relationships to others.

In the case of the young man, he is demanding reconciliation with the poor. If he follows what Jesus says, he will give what he has to the people who have surrounded him all of his life. But what Jesus is demanding is not just sacrifice, it is obedience.

That is what it means to follow. The more we follow him, the more we

are enabled to be as he was and to do as he did. We are being transformed along the way from our selfishness and self-centeredness to Christ-modeled, and Christ-centered selves. We are reaching toward “Christ-actualization” in our lives. We are on a journey: follow me. It is not a static position; it is not a “state.” It is leading somewhere. There is a goal. Where is he leading us? To the cross and to the resurrection.

When Jesus at the end of his stay on earth (Matt. 28:19) commands us to go into all the world, it is to make disciples – not to get as many people as we can to sign commitment cards, or to win decisions, or to kneel at an altar, or to raise their hands, or to pray a prayer, or to make converts – if we understand by these terms bare commitments – but to make disciples. We are commanded to go and “teach them to *obey*.”

Another way to put it is that we have too often cheapened grace. We would probably not have forced the decision that Jesus forced upon the young man. We would have made it easier for him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in The Cost of Discipleship imagines a conversation between a pastor and one of his parishioners.

The man says, “I have lost the faith I once had.”

“You must listen to the Word as it is spoken to you” the pastor responds. “I do,” the man replies, “but I cannot get anything out of it, it just falls on deaf ears.” “You really do not want to listen,” the pastor says. “On the contrary, I do.”

Then the pastor remembers the proposition, “Only those who believe obey.” But this does not help, for believing is what this man finds so hard. It is now time to say: “Only those who obey believe.”

The pastor confronts the man, “You are disobedient, that is what is preventing you from listening to Christ and believing in his grace.” He must not allow the man to hide under the cloak or cover of “cheap grace.” Obedience produces faith.

Grace was there sufficient enough for the rich young man to have chosen discipleship, but discipleship will not come apart from obedience to Jesus’ command. It is not just a “spiritual,” or theological question that is at stake. If Jesus had allowed him to keep on posing questions, the man would have escaped the necessity of being obedient.

Jesus had to create a situation for the young man from which there was no retreat from the real question, and he posed it radically: sell all you have and follow me. The young man already knew how to keep the law – it was not obedience to it that was the problem. But he refused to be obedient to its Master.

It was not God's will that this young man or anyone should perish. The young man himself weighed the matter and freely decided that discipleship was just too costly. He perished by making his own choice to follow the world rather than the Christ.

There is a decision every man and woman must make, and it is lifestyle commitment. It is at both a level of "being" and a level of "doing." The level of "being" strips away pride and selfishness. At the level of being is a reliance upon God rather than any goodness in ourselves for salvation. It is an emptiness of self-will, a crucifixion of selfishness. But "being," while preceding doing, is necessarily followed by it. "Go, sell, come, follow," both reflect and enact inner purity. Without enacting our faith, it is useless.

We have all known people like this: they profess to love everybody; they are proud of their own holiness; they give to missions and other ministries. They profess to love, but they cannot get along with the people in the church; they are gossips; they argue.

This is not the way it should be. We should rightly expect some fruit of discipleship in outward demeanor, not perfectly but "growingly." We know there are many reasons we do not love in deed as perfectly as we should. But we should be finding qualities in ourselves that are more and more like Christ.

Conclusion

Martin of Tours, a medic in the Roman army, entering a city on a winter day, is stopped by a beggar. He has no money to give the beggar. But he sees this man shivering, and so takes off his own raggedy cloak, divides it into two and gives half to the beggar. Then, that night, Martin had a dream. He saw Jesus wearing his old, torn shabby cloak. An angel asked him, "Master, why are you wearing that old cloak?" Jesus answered, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

Perhaps, when we reflect on this story this way, we can understand John Wesley's being accused of being a Jesuit. As his progeny, we are prone like him to understand that grace enables obedience, and that without grace-enabled obedience, we are in danger, like the rich young man, of being eternally lost.

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Messages for the Month of July

Around the Table

Jeremiah 31: 1-14; I Corinthians 11: 17-22

The theme of our reflection for the month of July is: "The Holy Spirit and the Community." The sub-topic for this Sunday is "AROUND THE TABLE." The title of our meditation this morning reminds me of a youth camp song: "Round the Table You Must Go." During mealtime, a typical youth camp program would feature getting to know you fellowship. Included in the meal time fellowship is a request in writing for a young lady and a young gentleman to go around the tables (some 10 tables) as the rest of the campers sing with gusto the "Round The Table" song.

Come to think of, it the table, the dining table, has been the venue for the sealing of transactions, legal and otherwise. The table that is being referred to in our lectionary reading is more than a dining table. It is called the Communion Table.

On that first Maundy night, who were gathered by Jesus around the Communion Table? Who else but His original twelve disciples. Around the Communion Table, they celebrated with Jesus the Last Supper. Twelve men of diverse personalities sat with Jesus around the table.

At the Communion Table, the diversity of character was transcended. Can you imagine Simon the Zealot, the fiery nationalist, dining with Matthew, the tax gatherer and publican? It was almost next to impossible. Look at Peter, all energy and activity and impetuosity seated with John, meditative and thoughtful and prayerful. Also gathered around the First Communion Table were Andrew, a man of shining and untroubled faith, and Thomas, the doubter.

The composition of twelve disciples, as James Stewart aptly put it "was an amazing synthesis of humanly irreconcilable elements." Isaiah's vision of the wolf and the lamb dwelling together best describes the diversity of the character of the twelve friends of Jesus. Yet, around the Communion Table, they were all invited to partake of the elements, to celebrate unity in diversity, for Jesus said: "This is my body, broken for you, for all of you. Take it in remembrance of Me. This is My blood poured out for the remission of your sins. Take, drink in remembrance of Me."

I am reminded of a story (actually there are two stories) related to me by Elder Kathie Barinaga. But let me share with you the one that appealed to me more. It came to pass that a vendor from Batangas was selling Last Supper wall hanging or decor. The enthusiastic buyer counted the disciples