

Sermon: Church of the Good Shepherd
October 11, 2009: Proper 23; Year B
Mark 10: 17-31
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There is a delightful story about a man who had searched for many years to find the answer to our most important question: *What is the meaning of life?* He had searched everywhere — traveled near and far — in search of a satisfying and satisfactory response. In the twilight of his years, he happened to come across an old friend whom he had not seen since their younger days in school. As they shared past memories together, the man looked at his friend and told him that he now worried that he might never receive an answer to his question. His friend then told him about a wise rabbi who might actually be the person he had been seeking for all these many years.

The next morning, the man said goodbye to his friend and went to see the rabbi. He found the wise teacher living in the woods, just as his friend had told him. After introducing himself and telling the rabbi who had sent him, he asked his question: *Good teacher, what is the meaning of life?* The rabbi, with a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes, said that he indeed knew the answer to his question. The seeker then gave a sigh of relief and listened for the rabbi to speak. As the rabbi spoke to him, he suddenly became confused because he did not understand what he was saying. The rabbi had spoken to him in the Hebrew language. The man anxiously said, *Rabbi, I don't understand what you're saying. Tell me what it means!*

It was then that the rabbi offered to give the man lessons in Hebrew for the extraordinary price of only \$600. The moral being — there is no such thing as a free lunch; there is no easy way through the proverbial forest of this life. There are obligations to be met, skills to be practiced, and yet unknown adventures to be taken, and then, and only then, the answer will come.

Over the past several weeks, our lectionary readings have included selections from the Epistle of James. In this ancient document, James often boldly describes what, from his point of view, Christian faith looks like when it is actually put into practice. He is interested in describing what we might expect to see and experience if we were to encounter a community devoted to living a life in Christ. James was a strong believer in practicing what one preaches, and there is no clearer statement of that premise than when he admonished the community to *be doers of the Word and not hearers only*.

Martin Luther, the cornerstone of the great Protestant Reformation, didn't care much for the Epistle of James, and so he dismissed it with the theological backhanded compliment — it is only a letter of straw. Luther saw an inherent danger in focusing on practice, or good works, as he called them. He feared such an attitude would lead us to believe that we can earn our way into salvation, rather than depend totally on faith in the merciful grace of God. Recalling the teaching of St. Paul and St. Augustine, Luther was certain that we cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try, for only God will bring in the kingdom.

Mark tells us that a man, whom Jesus loved, asked him his own deepest question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* In essence, Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, just as he has done throughout his life. Then comes the clincher: *Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.* In this case, the seeker was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then comes the next layer. Jesus tells his disciples that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God. They reply, as we do, when we hear that statement: *Then who can be saved?* Jesus offers a reassuring aside: *With human beings it is impossible; for God all things are possible. In God's realm, the first will be last and the last will be first.* It doesn't make any difference whether you're conservative or liberal in your political and social preferences, this is not easy or comfortable instruction to hear. Relatively speaking, in contrast to the rest of the world, Episcopalians are usually not ranked at the bottom of the economic charts. No wonder our choices for the Old Testament lesson today come from Amos, that prophet of doom, and Job, who perfected the prayer form we now know as lamentation. There is simply no place for the preacher or the congregation to hide today! In this little narrative of Mark, we can find ourselves in almost every line and paragraph — and what we see and hear isn't comfortable. We're the person with many possessions, the overwhelmed disciples, and the ones accustomed to being first to be chosen.

The bridge between what is possible and impossible is this statement: *For human beings it is impossible; for God all things are possible.* This statement frees us from an overwhelming burden, thinking that everything rests on our shoulders, while at the same time, offering hope that we can actually become more than we have previously known or ever imagined. *For human beings it is impossible; for God, all things are possible.*

This takes us back to both Martin Luther and the Letter of James. Luther wants us to have faith — faith in the grace and mercy of God and not just ourselves. James wants us to have faith, but that faith must be demonstrated or practiced in a way that we become the visible body of Christ in this world. We need both — held in tension, one informing the other, not just now and then, but on a daily basis. Our tradition informs us that Christ will return in glory and splendor, ushering in the ultimate and eternal reign of God — not on our timetable, but on God's own future, which we know as the fullness of time. So the question becomes for us: *What should we be doing in the meantime?*

G.K. Chesterton, a delightful English philosopher and perpetual crank, once posed this question: "If we were arrested and hauled into court, charged with the crime of being a Christian — would there be enough evidence to even convict us?" While we know the saving power of God's grace, we also don't want Chesterton's question to become a self-fulfilling prophecy for our church. To be convicted as a Christian would involve our giving it a try — individually and corporately. It is what we might practice and become as a community, the Church of the Good Shepherd, that I want to address this morning.

Good Shepherd seeks to become a trusting and faithful community. The young man who approached Jesus had kept the commandments and performed faithful service throughout his

life. He had also set personal limits on how far or how deep he would go. Jesus tests those limits by asking him to give up perhaps the one thing that was important to him — his security, grounded in the accumulation of many possessions. For a politician, it may require giving up or at least sharing power; for a teacher, it may mean giving up absolute control of the subject at hand; for a parent it may require giving up the need to always be right. The list could go on, but Jesus is asking the young man and all of us to be willing to give up and let go of whatever it is that prevents us from placing our complete trust and faith in God.

Kathleen Norris reminds us that the early Benedictine monks called this practice *detachment*, a word that has fallen on hard times lately. For the monks it meant “not allowing either worldly values or our own self-centeredness to distract us from what is most essential in our relationship with God, and with each other.” This definition of detachment makes sense because it makes room for the love of God to work within and through us. Thus, we stand a better chance of becoming a more trustful and faithful community. Our decision this year to not ask the community to give to a budget, but to the mission of Christ to which we are all called, is a major step, an important step in becoming a community that puts its faith and trust in God and God’s people.

Good Shepherd seeks to become a community that practices radical hospitality. Jesus made room for all sorts and conditions of persons — sinners and saints, mainstream and marginalized, the washed and the unwashed, the well known and unknown, the righteous and the unrighteous, the healer and the leper, the priest and the prostitute, the sacred and the profane. There are very few narratives in the Gospels that do not have something to do with this practice of radical hospitality. He drove the point home — *the last will be first and the first last*. The church seeks to practice the radical hospitality of Jesus.

There is a church in Atlanta that has a sign out front that lists the church’s name and then this statement underneath: *A Church Big Enough For God*. That statement says it all, for it has nothing to do with membership size or the vastness of the physical plant — rather it has to do with what kind of church it is — it’s a big church, to be sure — big in welcoming all sorts of God’s children — it is a church that practices radical hospitality and so it is indeed, a church big enough for God. We seek to become an even bigger church where the radical hospitality of Jesus is shared with friend and stranger, long timers and short, believers and searchers, and all those who seek God and are drawn to Christ. We seek to become a church big enough for God.

Good Shepherd seeks to become a generous community. How many times and how often have we known of the generosity of Jesus toward others — whether they be friends or strangers. The multiplication of the loaves, the feeding of multitudes, the healings from sickness and sorrow, the forgiving of sins both large and small, the hope given to the least and the last. Jesus viewed his own life and all that he possessed as a gift; never a reward or an entitlement. On the world’s terms, Jesus didn’t own very much, but he created great abundance for others. True generosity always springs from the understanding that what we have is a gift. Such an understanding can produce abundance from scarcity, or even abundance from abundance. When we don’t see life as a gift, but a reward competitively earned or an entitlement deserved, then we will only create scarcity from the abundance

we have been given. We will never know the joy of responding with generosity — materially and spiritually — that Jesus desires for us. Generosity is the concrete expression of a trusting and hospitable community.

Relying on our faith and trust in God, practicing the radical hospitality of Jesus, and responding to this gift of life with generosity — these are the practices we seek in becoming what God calls us to be.

Left simply to our own efforts, we will likely fall short. However, we are assured of success, if we are willing to venture forth and risk becoming such a community. *For with God, all things are possible.* Amen.

The Holy Bible. *The Gospel according to Mark 10:17-31.* NRSV.
Norris, Kathleen. Amazing Grace. *Detachment.* Pp.32-36.