

Oct. 14, 2018
21st Sunday after Pentecost
With Baptism of Joseph F. Maras
Chapel of the Resurrection
Preacher: Rev. James A. Wetzstein, University Pastor

First Reading: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

A reading from Amos:

Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

The Word of the Lord.

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:12-16

A reading from Hebrews:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The Word of the Lord.

Gospel Reading: Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know 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.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these

since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

The Gospel of the Lord.

This reading from the Gospel according to Mark makes church-goers nervous, even as it makes preachers nervous, because nobody knows that the pastor is going to talk about money. Talking about money makes us nervous, for both the hearer and the preacher. Let me then take a moment to just add to your anxiety and observe that this book of readings, it sounds like the Bible when I read it, and it is, but it's only portions of the Bible, arranged in such a way that we know which readings to read every Sunday. So, this morning, Natalie read to you beginning with the first reading from Amos and that is identified in this book as the first reading to be read on a Sunday that falls between October 9th and October 15th because the Sundays move around, or the numbers move around. So we have these assigned readings, so it wasn't my choice this morning to preach about money. And I am reasonably certain, given the fact that we're not the only place that uses a book like this, that this morning people in the panhandle of Florida have heard this story about the rich man who couldn't stand the thought of losing everything he owned. And people in North Carolina are hearing the same story, and their pastors are getting ready to try to say a word. Other people who are hearing this story are people who have just been laid off, or have lost their job some other way. I'm reasonably certain that someone hearing this story in church this morning has recently received a devastating diagnosis from their doctor. Let us pray that all of these, and many more, including us, hear good news this morning.

Two thoughts came to my mind as I studied this text. One is one of my favorite, I think it's a C.S. Lewis quote – sorry, I didn't take the time to check my sources -- but some really wise guy said about this text. "With God all things are possible, including getting the camel through the eye of a needle. It's just really hard on the camel. It's just really hard on the camel." And the other thought that I had was this story of a student that we all have in common, I'm not going to name them. But this student has a very pleasant and easy-going personality -- which is not in and of itself that unique, because there are lots of people around here that have very pleasant and easy-going personalities. But one of the things that struck me about this student was that

nothing much seems to phase them. There's kind of a quiet confidence and expectation of blessing. She just gives that off. And then I learned her story, or at least an important story. And that is, that as a teenager, while at school, and her family at work (her parents at work), the family home burned to the ground. To the ground. They lost everything. And she says, "I learned it was just stuff. It was just stuff."

I suspect that some among us have been through those sorts of catastrophic losses, where others might look at us and say, "How in the world will you go on from this place?" Most of us do. The folks who do the research and pay attention to the questions of resilience tell us that on average about three-quarters of us get through devastating loss and find our way out to the other side having acknowledged what has happened, not denying its tragedy, but placing it into a larger story that expects good things.

So, as we think about this man who, in the conversation with Jesus, is revealed to us to be wealthy, having many possessions, as Mark describes him, permit me a handful of observations that I hope are helpful to you. The first is, that when this man approaches Jesus, having at some level perceived that there is more to life than keeping the commandments, right, because this is an earnest man. You oughtn't read this story in any way cynically. Jesus doesn't hear him cynically. When you hear this man saying to Jesus, "I have been working on and keeping these all of my life, since I was a youth", I would suggest that the appropriate response is not "yeah, right". No, no, this is someone who is about the business. This is someone who kind of "nerds out" over the law of God. This is someone who takes it really seriously. And having taken it seriously, he approaches Jesus with a question that he seems not to have answered yet for himself, in spite of taking it all very seriously. And that is, "What's the nature of the inheritance of eternal life? How do I do that?"

But as he approaches Jesus I want you to notice this thing, this little exchange that happens at the very beginning, he says to Jesus "Good teacher". This is the compliment he pays. And Jesus responds, "Why are you calling me good? There's no one good but God". What an odd thing for Jesus to say. Could it be that this man, like everybody else in the Gospel of Mark, except for two: a blind man and a centurion who watches him die, could it be that this man even in approaching Jesus and calling him "good teacher" doesn't really know who Jesus is? Thinks that he is just in conversation with a peer, someone else who is earnestly seeking the will of God, someone else who is earnestly seeking to know God's way. So when Jesus calls him to follow him, "Really? Why would I do that if you can't give me an answer to my question?"

The second observation, and I've already kind of hinted at this, is that when Jesus hears this man saying that he has earnestly sought the will of God since he was a child, Jesus is described as loving him. This is a Jesus who has come for even this rich man. His own riches are in and of themselves not a barrier to the love of God. Jesus is also there for him. Loving him, that's why he calls him to follow him, because he loves him. This is not Jesus calling the man's bluff. This is Jesus calling the man. That being said, the man is incapable of answering the call because he's got too much stuff. Before we go and spiritualize this for ourselves, before we go and start talking about values and priorities and making Jesus first in our lives, pay

attention to the fact that this man has an actual physical barrier. He can't follow Jesus, even if he could carry all of his money around with him in a big old wheelbarrow. What's he going to do with his house and his fields and the people he employs and all of the rest of that stuff? He's physically incapable of following Jesus because his stuff prevents that level of mobility in his life, he's not that nimble. He can't make that change. He's got too much. This is why he is described as being "shocked" and "grieving" because though he might want to hear more from Jesus, maybe even at some level follow him around and hear more of what Jesus has to say, he can't.

Before this is a question of values and priorities and security and identity, and it's all of those things, it is first and foremost a question of logistics. What are your barriers? What are the things in your life that are important, and good, and even gifts, maybe even signs of blessing? That's at the center of Peter's question, "Boy, if the rich guy who clearly has been blessed by God can't be saved, what hope is there for the rest of us?" What are those things that are impeding you, that get you stuck, that as you hear a word from Jesus, as you sense an opportunity to follow, to hear a vocational word, come to you and say "yes, but what about...." I don't know what those things are, but I know that all of us deal with them.

Then the last thing, on the way to the conclusion, is this observation at the very, very end. Notice that when Peter comes to Jesus and says, "Hey look, we have given up everything. You told this other guy to give up everything, we are actually walking the walk. What's in it for us?" Jesus responds with a word of assurance. He says, "Truly I tell you there is no one who has left house, or brothers or sister, or mother or children, or fields for my sake and for the sake of the Good News (there's all of the things left behind) who will not get it all back 100 times even in this age while we're walking and talking."

And then he provides a list of the things you're going to get back, and if you read it quickly you might imagine that the list of stuff that you get back is exactly the same as the stuff that you gave up. It's missing one critical element, there are no fathers in Jesus' second list. I don't think that's an oversight. I think that's because, when you follow Jesus, he becomes your brother and he is the most beloved son of your Heavenly Father. And because Jesus is now your brother, you are an heir with Jesus of the estate of your Heavenly Father. There's no father in the second line because the moment you give up everything to follow Jesus, you get a father in that relationship.

Which brings us back to the very beginning of the story. In this whole question of "what do I have to do to receive salvation," we blow by the fact that the man's first question is "what do I do to inherit eternal life?" That's not work language; that's gift language. I mean, we might joke about the fact that you don't want to do certain things or you do in order to be written out of Aunt Mabel's will, or that there are other things that might get you written into her will. Nevertheless, language of inheritance is not the language of earning, it's always the language of gift. And as you follow Jesus, your brother, you have become an inheritor of all that God will give you, all that is a part of this cosmic, eternal estate. That's your identity.

This morning, Joseph is going to become our brother. He's a Valpo dad so we've kind of known him all along, even though we haven't met him. But this morning, something more is going to happen. He has known about Jesus, and even known Jesus, for many years. But this morning, he is going to be marked with the sign of the Holy Cross. He is going to be washed in the waters of his baptism, and he is going to gain, for himself, as a gift of God, a new identity which nothing will be able to take away from him. It is indelible, it can't be erased, it can't be removed, it can't be undone. It will be his inheritance, even as your identity as a child of God is your inheritance. In the name of Jesus. Amen.