

Proper 23-B  
Oct. 14, 2018  
St. John's Cathedral

I read somewhere the other day that there are 300,000 items in the average American home. I assume that they have counted the forks and the Legos as individual items, but that is still a whole lot of stuff. There is more: about a tenth of us need to rent a storage unit for things that don't fit in the house, and about a fourth of people who have two-car garages have no room in them for even one car.

I share these statistics as a prelude for a gospel story that may make us squirm a bit. It begins as a story of a man who seems interested in deepening his spiritual life. He approaches Jesus, kneels respectfully and says, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He is the person we hope will join a confirmation class – a man with great and sincere questions and probably enthusiasm. Jesus responds, though, by calling him back to the basics – the commandments – the heart of Jewish faith and practice. And the man replies that he has kept all of them since he was a boy. So far, so good.

But then comes the zinger. Jesus looks him in the eye – in a way that communicates that he loves him (just as he loves us) and says there is just one more little thing this man must do: sell everything and give the money to the poor. And THEN, he says, come and follow me.

You can almost hear the air going out of this man as he hears this. Our version of this story says he went away 'shocked and grieving.' Another translation says his face 'clouded over.' My impression is that his jaw dropped.

He is deflated. After a lifetime of living righteously and keeping the law, it was almost as if he had worked hard on a term paper, turned it in expecting to get an A on it and received instead a D-minus. All that work. All those commandments. All that good and righteous behavior, and it wasn't enough. So he went away.

But it was more than just going away. He went away for a reason-- because he had many possessions Things he apparently could not part with. Maybe his life was too complicated to pare down.

This is essentially a story about discipleship – about following Jesus. That makes it more than just a story about this man and his stuff. But the stuff seems to take center stage. I'd bet this is the part that gets under our skin the most, not because we are not generous, but because we have many possessions. I would be less than honest if I said I had this worked out in my own life. Like many of you, I am a person with a lot of stuff (although I can get my one car into my one-car garage at least).

This came home to me in a very embarrassing way a few years ago when I came home from a camping trip, hot and tired and ready for some fresh clothes. I opened my bedroom closet door only to discover an avalanche of skirts, seaters, blouses and dresses that just about knocked me over. While I was away the pole on which my many clothes had hung had broken under the weight of too many things. And so there I was with a heap of rumpled clothes falling out into the room.

It was a hard lesson in how much stuff I had accumulated without even realizing how out of control it was. Needless to say, a lot of it got donated. But just to be safe, I put a brace on the rod, too.

Jesus' encounter with this man is a hard lesson that makes us ask whether we possess things or whether things possess us. The great sadness of the man is that he grieves his situation because he cannot relinquish the stuff he has accumulated.

Over the years many commentators and many preachers (myself included) have tried to soften the lesson in this passage, which is, admittedly, a harsh one. To take it literally would mean living in pretty sparse accommodations with closets with lots of extra room. It would be scripture as it was described in our reading from Hebrews: sharper than any two-edged sword.

These words of Jesus are a call to radical discipleship. A call not to be weighed down by wealth or anything else that keeps up from becoming a follower.

Of course we hear this story in a time when the economy always seems to be in the news and also in our lives. We wonder what the economy will do – how we can live not only day to day, but also into our retirement years. How we will get a good job, provide for a family, pay for college? And this makes this story even more complicated to hear. Give it all away? You've got to be kidding!

But this story can also bring us back to some basic things. One is that God does provide us with what we need – and most often more. And that brings forth in us a sense of gratitude. A sense of trust. And out of that gratitude and trust we are empowered to be generous. To share from what we have been given.

In this traditional fall season of focusing on stewardship ( the responsible and faithful management of what we have been given) we are asked to take stock of how we share from our abundance. In part, share to empower the work of the Church through the mission and

ministry of this congregation. We'll be hearing more about that today and in the coming weeks.

This story can also shock us into awareness. The things we must hold on to can hold us in a strange and sad grip. A friend who works as a financial planner once said to me that without perspective, the security we long for can become its own burden.

And of course we live in a culture that often measures success by what we have. A home, a car, a remodeled kitchen (one of my own secret desires) sometimes define us – at least in our own eyes. The American dream is often couched in terms of bigger, better and more. One of the fastest growing business opportunities in this country now is storage units – places where we can keep the stuff that doesn't fit into our houses and garages.

A broader question is probably to ask what are we holding on to so tightly that we can't open ourselves to Jesus? What might keep us from answering the call to discipleship? What makes us a camel that is too chubby to squeeze through a small opening? Maybe it is our stuff. Maybe it is something else.

I thought this week of a scripture passage from II Timothy that is not among today's readings. The rich (probably most of us if we are honest – at least in a global sense) are advised to be "rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they make take hold of the life that really is life."

That's a great phrase: the life that really is life. The authentic thing. The life lived in relationship to God and others. The life where we give and receive love. Where we practice

generosity. The life where there is a bit of an opening for Jesus to transform us through his love.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest who is one of the best known preachers in the country, once asked the pastor of a church where she was guest preacher what she should preach on and he replied with a question: “What is saving your life right now?” (I’d venture a guess that the 300,000 items in my house are not saving my life right now. ) But that question invites us to ask what are those things of eternal value that lead us to the life that really is life?

One of the most engaging parts of today’s gospel is the almost palpable tension as the man walks away. Sad. Grieving. Downcast. Don’t you just want to hear a different ending? Or at least know the rest of the story? Maybe he went home, thought over what Jesus said and changed his mind. Made a radical choice to help the poor. Or maybe he walked off, convinced that Jesus’ demands were just too extreme, even for a good religious man who had kept the commandments since boyhood. Or is there another ending?

These wonderful, enigmatic stories always leave us with an opportunity – a place for our souls to engage. That opportunity puts us into the story to finish it with our own lives. Our own choices.

Jesus always looks at us with love and calls us to follow him. What does that look like for you and for me as we live into the rest of this story?