

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – October 10, 2021 – Treasuring God
Hebrews 4:14-16 and Mark 10:17-22**

Charles Dicken's *Christmas Carol* presents the trope of the miserly Scrooge. Scrooge is a shrewd businessman, adept at making money. But he lacks compassion. Even at Christmastime, that season bathed in the spirit of generosity, his heart remains stubbornly unchanged, as he shuns all signs of gratitude and joy in favor of cold, disconnected defiance.

In every age, there are those who inhabit the realm of privilege. And yet, no one should be reduced to a caricature. Many wealthy individuals have shown themselves to be incredibly generous through the establishment of foundations, through personal contributions to the church, and through their support of various causes for the benefit of the common good. People and their motivations are complex and nuanced.

Even so, there are those who do seem to spend their lives searching for every loophole, every excuse, and every opportunity to maintain and grow what they have without ever giving a second thought to others. This, of course, is the other end of the spectrum. And then, at every other point along the way, we find those who are

earnestly wrestling with questions of acquisition, and wealth, and generosity, which is exactly where we find ourselves in our second lesson this morning.

In Mark's Gospel, we encounter a man who is engaged in some of the most meaningful questions imaginable regarding life and the life to come. He hurries to meet Jesus, throws himself at the teacher's feet, and, with all sincerity, poses a question about what is required in order to inherit eternal life. It is readily apparent that this man is not testing Jesus. Neither is he seeking to trap him. Rather, he is genuinely seeking answers.

As the dialogue unfolds, we learn that he endeavors to do the right thing. From childhood, he has devoted himself to following the commandments. In response, Jesus looks upon him and loves him. He doesn't judge him, or dismiss him, or rebuke him for his lack of faith or understanding. Instead, Jesus has compassion for this man, and values the authentic nature of this man's longing.

Yet, given that people and their motivations are complicated, along with the knowledge that Jesus is able to plumb the depths of our hearts, it is no surprise that he speaks directly to this man's weaknesses. "You lack one thing," Jesus explains. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Friends, what is God asking of you today? Seriously? If Jesus was to survey all of the things within you that are good, and kind, and just, and then offer just one challenge, what do you think that he would say? If Jesus was to engage with you in a private conversation, and tell you that one aspect of your life was holding you back in your journey with God, would you be able to forsake it?

Perhaps, it is our incessant worry that poses the greatest obstacle, a clear indication that we lack trust in God's ability to provide. Perhaps, it is our love of quarreling or the desire to always be right that drives the deepest wedge between ourselves and God's purposes. Perhaps, it is our hard-heartedness. Our stubborn disposition. Our dismissal of others. Perhaps, we are like the man in Mark's Gospel this morning, and it is how we view our possessions that is holding us back.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus calls a variety of individuals from all walks of life to follow him, and they do. They leave their old lives behind and they follow. Here, we find the only example in Mark, and, perhaps, the only example in any of the four Gospels where an individual rejects Jesus' personal invitation to become

one of his followers. ¹ The text tells us that when Jesus told this man to sell all of his stuff, “he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

This exchange occurred some 2,000 years ago. And with this in mind, it is easy to imagine that the possessions of a wealthy person in that age could hardly compare to the sheer volume of items that most of us now claim as our own. Such is the reality of our affluence, built and maintained on the premise of consumption. Moreover, as we reflect on our own super-abundance of belongings, we understand what a distraction they can be.

A little bit later in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus engages with his disciples about the nature of wealth. And he tells them that while the temptation to appear successful is ever-present, in the economy of God, those “who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” And then, he makes the point even more directly, saying “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

As many of you are aware, I recently sent a letter to our congregation stating that I have accepted a new call, and that I will be departing next month following six

¹ Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 183.

years of ministry at Westminster. This means that now is a fitting season for both personal and corporate reflection regarding the nature of your discipleship. Namely, how is God calling this church to live into its purpose for the future? And with that purpose in the forefront of your minds, what is your role in heeding God's will for Westminster?

In the months ahead, it will be essential for this fellowship to draw together in unity of mission, in support of the leadership, and in encouragement of the staff. Friends, there is no way around it. This congregation needs you to give as you are able. To share your time and your commitment. To give of your energy and your talent. And to contribute your financial resources for the well-being of the whole. For this is what makes the church of Jesus Christ vibrant wherever it is planted. Our common calling is to treasure God. To seek the best interest of the other. And to let the mind of Christ inspire and transform us. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.