

PENTECOST 19B/LECTIONARY 28

October 11, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 Psalm 90:12-17 Hebrews 4:12-16 ***Mark 10:17-31***

Native hunters in the jungles of Africa have a clever way of trapping monkeys.

They slice a coconut in two, hollow it out, and in one half of the shell cut a hole just big enough for a monkey's hand to pass through. Then they place an orange in the other coconut half before fastening together the two halves of the coconut shell. Finally, they secure the coconut to a tree with a rope, retreat into the jungle, and wait.

Sooner or later, an unsuspecting monkey swings by, smells the delicious orange, and discovers its location inside the coconut. The monkey then slips his hand through the small hole, grasps the orange, and tries to pull it through the hole. Of course, the orange won't come out; it's too big for the hole. To no avail the persistent monkey continues to pull and pull, never realizing the danger he is in.

While the monkey struggles with the orange, the hunters simply stroll in and capture the monkey by throwing a net over him. As long as the monkey keeps his fist wrapped around the orange, the monkey is trapped.

It's too bad the poor monkey could save its own life if it would only let go of the orange. It rarely occurs to a monkey, however, that it can't have both the orange and its freedom. That delicious orange becomes a deadly trap.¹

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In today's Gospel reading we meet the rich young man. He seems to have it all. Not only does he seem to be a very righteous man – by his own confession, he's kept all the commandments since his youth – but he's also been blessed by an abundance of possessions.

In this rich young man's mind, and according to his cultural beliefs, this abundance of possessions were his God-given reward for being righteous. It was commonly believed that God blessed those who were righteous, and cursed those who were unrighteous. In other words, the poor were poor because they weren't very good people. And, the converse was also believed to be true: the rich were rich because they were good people.

And yet, there was one thing this rich young man still seemed to lack: assurance of his eternal inheritance, his place in God's eternal kingdom. So he approaches Jesus. He's one of the few persons in the Gospels who came up to Jesus wanting to have an honest theological, biblical debate. Most who approached Jesus wanted food, or wanted to be healed, or asked ethical questions.

“Curiously, Jesus refuses to engage the young man in an abstract theological discussion about eternal life. Rather, Jesus invites the young man to be his disciple. He didn't say to him, 'Believe the following things about me.' What he said was, 'Follow me.'

“And Mark says that the young man got depressed, turned away, and walked in the other direction. Mark says that the reason was money. He didn't walk away because he failed to believe that Jesus was the Savior or because he wasn't sure that Jesus Christ was Lord. He walked away because he had lots of stuff.”ⁱⁱ

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But isn't it just human nature to believe that what we have is ours? If we have a lot of stuff, even more so – we believe that our having an abundance of possessions is our reward for hard work, or that we somehow deserve to have more.

Then we try to hang onto what we have even harder. And without even realizing, we're becoming more and more like that trapped little monkey. Without even realizing, it is no longer us that possesses something – it is the possessions that possess us.

Let's revisit our 10-10-80 example from last week. This time we'll use just the three buckets: Sharing, Saving and Consuming.

Now, imagine time are tough. That's not a stretch to imagine nowadays. Maybe it's an expected bonus that didn't materialize, or even worse, a lost job. So we sit down to re-evaluate our financial situation. We look at our three buckets. We've now got less, and we need it to do more.

What is our natural inclination? Our natural inclination is to take these two buckets (*Sharing and Saving*) and dump them in here (*Consuming*) so we can continue to try to live like we always have. We continue to try to hang on to more.

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Would it make a difference to us if, when we say the Creed, we begin by saying, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator ***and owner*** of heaven and earth”? If we live in this world in relationship with God as created, claimed, marked, saved forever individuals, then we live with different questions and different responses than those who do not. And it is those questions and responses that help us identify when the selfishness, greed, hoarding tendencies of this broken world are climbing back into the driver’s seat or our lives.

There is a major difference in how we view and implement wealth, relationships, and self when we know we are not the owners but rather the caretakers. When it’s not “my money,” “my wife,” “my car,” “my child,” “my church,” “my worship service,” etc., but God’s shared with me, I change my view.

So the questions I now ask change:

Not: How much of my money am I going to give to God?

But: How much of God's money do I need for myself and how much can I share with God and others?

Not: Worship is doing what I need to do to make God a part of my life.

But: I am seeing worship as a time to celebrate and thank God, responding to all the ways God has shaped and formed my life throughout the past week.ⁱⁱⁱ

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In God's economy, giving is getting.

A preacher told the following story:

Recently, I was working in the garage when I needed a different wrench. Both of my hands were full, and I couldn't take up the right wrench without letting go of something in one of my hands. It's like that with wealth and possessions; if that is what we have to hang onto, we will not have open hands to receive what only God can give us. Please understand me: There is nothing particularly holy about being poor. But generosity is a fruit of God's presence in our lives and it requires our willingness to trust God enough to give. That's when God makes our giving into getting the very blessings of eternity.^{iv}

- i Daily Wisdom, 3-30-98, “How to Catch a Monkey,” from <http://www.dailywisdom.com/archives/old/1998/03/dw-03-30-98.html>, downloaded October 10, 2009.
- ii William Willimon, “And the Reason Was Money” in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2009), 10.
- iii This section is heavily indebted to Wayne Nelson, a member of the Bishop's staff in the North Carolina Synod/ELCA, from “October 11, 2009 – Mark 10:17-31” in *Stewardship Now – Sermon Starters*, http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Discipleship/Stewardship/stewardshipnow_sermonstarters.aspx#2, downloaded October 10, 2009.
- iv “Tools for Wooship” in *The Toolkit – Date: October 14-15, 2006* (Burnsville, MN: Changing Church Forum, 2006), 5.