

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

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Some of you are familiar with the stories of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, told by Garrison Keillor. In this mythical town, colorful characters not only entertain our imagination, but give insights of life. Keillor told the story about a Sunday morning in Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church. The sermon has been droning on too long, and Clarence Bunsen has checked out early. He realizes it's almost time for the offering, so he quietly reaches for his wallet. Clarence discovers he has no cash. He takes out his pen and hides the checkbook in the middle of his Bible, next to one of the Psalms. He begins to scratch out a check for thirty dollars, because he almost had a heart attack last week, and because somebody in the church will count the offering, and he wants them to see he gave thirty dollars.

Clarence tries not to be obvious, but a lady to his right sees him. He can tell she thinks he's writing in the pew Bible, so he doesn't look at what he's doing. She gives him a funny stare, and turns back to the sermon. Clarence tries to quietly rip the check from the checkbook, with limited success, still not looking at what he's doing so the lady in the pew won't know he wasn't paying attention to the sermon. The offering plate comes by, and Clarence proudly puts in the check, only to realize a moment too late he has just written a check for three hundred dollars, not thirty as he intended. Clarence accidentally wrote three-zero-zero on both lines when he wasn't looking.

What could he do? On the one hand, he couldn't go downstairs after church and find the deacons counting the collection and say, "Fellows, there's been a mistake. I gave more than I really want to." On the other hand, he gave all he had in the checking account and a little more. Perhaps the Bunsen family will have to eat beans and oatmeal for the rest of the month, Clarence thought, even though the contribution was going to a good place. One thing was for sure, noted Garrison Keillor. In this moment, Clarence felt fully alive for the first time all day! Inadvertently, Clarence had made any sacrificial gift which put God first.

In today's Gospel lesson, we read of a young man who seemed to have everything going for him. Early in life, he had studied the Bible, learning all of its rules of how to live life, and played it by the book. When he heard of this new prophet teacher, Jesus, he sought him out, hoping to discover greater contentment and the assurance he was in good standing in God's Kingdom. The young man asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It's a straight forward question, but he inadvertently opens the proverbial "can of worms." Jesus gave an unusual reply: "Why do you call Me good? ... No one is good but God alone." Was this some kind of test from Jesus, asking to be properly recognized by a confession of faith? It seemed to imply something was wrong with the question.

Jesus went on to say, “You know the commandments...” and named some of them. The young man protested, saying: “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus recognized the earnestness of his words, and the note of despair in his voice. And Scripture says Jesus looked upon him with love in His eyes. Here was a most excellent young man. My guess is this was someone we would all admire and would like to know as a friend, perhaps the kind of boy we’d be proud to have as a son.

But Jesus, even from love’s perspective, recognized a flaw the young man hadn’t recognized. Jesus said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven; then come, follow Me.” When the young man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Obviously, Christ’s answer blew him away, most unexpectedly. Had Jesus named some difficult observance, the young man would have likely mastered it. He was used to being successful in self-control. And he felt secure with many resources at his fingertips.

The sad truth about this young man was how all the things he enjoyed owning actually owned him. He was so used to having, that he didn’t recognize how he’d been had. Now he was challenged to reshuffle his priorities. Instead of fully giving his heart to God, and giving his heart to people in need, the man had given token amounts, keeping all the possessions which controlled his heart, giving him the illusion of self-control. It was a devastating insight to him, unmasking hidden layers of greed, and teaching painful lessons in humility.

As the young man walked away in sorrow, Jesus pronounced: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth 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.” The disciples reacted strongly, astonished and perplexed, protesting: “Who, then, can be saved?” For you see, even though these disciples had basically left everything to follow their Master, Jesus, most hadn’t really given up much. So they recognized themselves in the young man’s shortcomings.

We ask the wrong question in trying to establish what minimum requirement we can fulfill to stay on God’s good side. If wealth gives us illusions of power or self-control, we need to be confronted, particularly when it hinders our compassion and spiritual commitment. The Kingdom of God often reverses earthly values, making the first last, and the last first. The more afraid we are to release whatever has its hold on us for the sake of others, the more we need to hear these words of Jesus as literal truth!

The disciples asked: “Who, then can be saved?” Jesus responded: “For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God, all things are possible.” Is this a story of judgment, or of grace? It’s the last we hear of the rich young man in Scripture. But I’ve got a hunch it was not the end of the story. Who knows what seeds were planted by Christ? Isn’t there an operative word which changes the possibility in the whole drama? Remember when the young man asked his question, Jesus acknowledged him in love. Doesn’t our ultimate hope lie in this sacrificial form of love called “forgiveness?” When we experience forgiveness and are touched by love, we begin to understand sacrifice. In such surprising moments when we make sacrificial gifts or can forgive the undeserving, we will feel most alive ... in Christ! Amen.