

Proper XXIII Year B: 13/ 14 October 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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“The welfare and well-being of creation, the ability to coexist in spite of our perceived differences, the meeting of one another’s needs such that no one goes without is truly what God’s Kin-dom is predicated upon.”

Job 23: 1-9, 16-17

Psalm 90: 12-17

Hebrews 4: 12-16

Mark 10: 17-31

Primogeniture: the right of succession belonging to the first-born child, i.e. the eldest son. In other words, the first-born male child is the designated heir to a family’s assets, holdings, and titles. I became better acquainted with the idea of first-born male privilege during the four years I lived in Canada, which is a commonwealth nation and part of the former British Empire.

Now I will admit that I do have a bit of a fascination with all things royal, but my Canadian friends take that to a whole new level. The idea of aristocracy is one that is very difficult for me to wrap my head around: that landholdings and bloodlines are means by which one distinguishes one’s self from the working and lower classes, and birth right determines who gains in privilege and who loses. Having a fascination with the royal family is one thing; perpetuating archaic rights of inheritance and unearned privilege a tad unsettling. Add to that the notion of *paterfamilias* – eldest male as head-of-household –and you have the recipe for a patriarchal society. Something that dogs us well into the 21st century.

Primogeniture and *paterfamilias* where accepted practices in the ancient world, especially during most of Israel’s history, which makes today’s story of the man who had many possessions a bit perplexing.

I want to believe he is asking Jesus a rhetorical question, but it’s evident from the story that he is, in humility, sincerely asking what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. Is he the first-born male? If so, doesn’t he know he has the right of inheritance simply as a matter of his birth order and gender? Maybe he’s a second son. We don’t know. All we do know is that he

believes Jesus has something to say about the matter. And Jesus **does** have something to say: something about the *ethics of radical discipleship*.

At first glance, it is tempting to say this is simply about wealth. I've said it many times before: wealth is not a sin. Our attitude and approach to wealth and the pursuit of profit, however, can be sinful. Wealth is often misunderstood as a "blessing" from God. That God showers material goods and physical well-being upon the deserving while afflicting the sinful and disobedient with suffering and the lack of comfort. Just think of the story of Job. If you doubt this belief exists today, just listen to a television evangelist who espouses a prosperity gospel extolling their mega mansion and private jet as justification of God's favor. It existed then and it exists today. This understanding that wealth is a divine blessing from God simply masks a truth: wealth as a substitute for God. Wealth isn't problematic. Our attitude and approach to wealth is.

What is problematic is our trust in our possessions and in one's power to acquire wealth **rather** than in God, who is our ultimate security and comfort. This plays out in the question the man asks Jesus; "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The key word upon which everything hinges is the verb "to do." What must I **do**? Jesus' reply is a familiar one. One the man, as well as all of us, knows about. The Commandments. Not all the commandments. Just six of them. The six that deal with living together in community.

The man somewhat misses the point. And maybe so do we. Even the disciples are a bit flummoxed. These six commandments are not just something we do. They are a way of living life. A spiritual practice. One whose focus is not on our own gain, but on the well-being of the whole community. Jesus is speaking of caring for and sharing with one another. This is what an *ethics of radical discipleship* is and it calls for a transformation of character. An ethics of radical discipleship calls for a transformation of character. One that places unconditional trust in God's grace by which we are adopted as children of God; not through any effort of our own. We can do nothing to earn our way into God's kin-dom. What we **can** do is participate in its inbreaking, which calls us towards a new behavior, a new way of **being** in the world. The commandments are means by which we are guided into this new relationship with its focus on selflessness, self-giving, gratitude and hospitality rather than on coveting, taking, hoarding,

exploiting. But all of that still isn't enough. We, as the man in the story, must be willing to let go of our possessions, sharing them with those who are most in need. Then, and only then, are we truly ready to follow Jesus. And that isn't easy.

The man went away, saddened because he had many possessions. You can read that as saying the man walked away from Jesus because he had lots of possessions and was unwilling to give them up. Or, that he was saddened because he knew how much he had to do before he was fully able to follow Jesus. That may sound like simple semantics. It's not. He could have been walking away from Jesus **or** in his desire to follow Jesus, something he is willing to do, was acknowledging how painful it was going to be to surrender his possessions for the greater good of the whole community. After all, that is the *essence* of the commandments: the greater good of the community in relationship to God. Only by doing so are we actively participating in the inbreaking of God's Kin-dom.

The man was walking away from Jesus because he was unwilling to do what Jesus asked. Or, he was going away saddened because he had much to dispose of before he joined with Jesus. Two interpretations from which we must finish the story. Two interpretations that place the spotlight on us to answer which we are drawn to. Are our possessions an obstacle to following Jesus, to living into God's Kin-dom?

Before you begin to think only in material terms, remember that we also possess attitudes, biases, and presuppositions. All of these can be equally as obstructionistic as material wealth. An ethics of radical discipleship calls us to a deep awareness of *whatever* colludes in an effort to thwart Jesus' message of love of neighbor, love of self, and love of God.

The Kin-dom of God is indeed unfolding around us. To follow Jesus, to join with him in God's mission of reconciling and healing the many hurts and misdeeds that inflict the world, is no easy task. Matter-of-fact, true discipleship can be very painful. To let go of one's cherished possessions and practices and comforts to pursue the greater good of the community is deeply challenging. However, what we gain in surrendering to Jesus is immeasurable. The welfare and well-being of creation, the ability to coexist in spite of our perceived differences, the meeting of one another's needs such that no one goes without is truly what God's Kin-dom is

predicated upon. We can participate in bringing such a world to fruition. But first, we must surrender our possessions and follow where Jesus leads us.

Before you saying anything, before I hear any rebuttal, I am **not** suggesting that we all need to live as monastics. Yes, the ideal of living communally where we all share of our resources can be the epitome of Christian living. What I am saying, is we can take first steps towards living a life of radical discipleship where our shared ethics is for the benefit of the common good of all. A first step where we begin to develop a spiritual practice of surrender, of giving our trust to God as the source of our comfort and sustenance. A first step in the direction of letting go of superfluous materialism as well as long held attitudes and beliefs that hinder rather than inform a Christ-filled life. It will not be easy. But it is the cost of being a follower of Christ.

There is no right of inheritance in God's Kin-dom. There is no inheritance predicated on one's gender or social standing. There is only God's grace and abundant love. There are, however, obstacles and hindrances to our trusting in God's providence and desire for wholeness and happiness. What we need to do is take that first step. Will it be in a direction that takes us away from Jesus – the first interpretation of the man's response to Jesus's dictum – or will it be as acknowledgement of our willingness to shed that which hinders in an effort to fully embrace Jesus and work with him in ushering in God's Kin-dom – the second interpretation of the man's response to Jesus. All it takes is a first step towards a spiritual practice that unburdens us of unnecessary baggage that weighs us down. Let us, therefore, willingly pack lightly for this journey with Christ in ushering in God's Kin-dom of peace, love, and justice.