

Why Do You Call Me Good?

20th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23 (28) B, October 10, 2021

Remember a couple of weeks ago, when I said that the readings reminded me of a favorite *New Yorker* cartoon, with everybody in church worried that Jesus wanted them to give away all their money, at least until the preacher got up in the pulpit and said “Now I’m going to tell you why he didn’t actually mean that?” Well...

Well, now that that very reading it upon us, as we’ve just heard, my bounden duty is to remind us that, in short, he did. Jesus, that is. Mean it, that is. Mean that this guy had to give away all he had if he wanted to be good and reach the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is mum about whether everyone else had to, though you do get the sense that he was glad they heard it, given what he ended up saying next. His attitude toward personal finance and career planning was, to say the least, interesting during his ministry. He asked pretty much all of his closest followers to leave their nets and follow him, for he would make them ‘fishers of men,’ or, as we would say, people. One always thinks of that task as winning hearts, minds, and souls, but it might’ve meant pocketbooks as well, now that you think about it. Jesus also made Levi, or Matthew, or whatever his name was give up a good-paying, if exploitative, job collecting taxes as the particular cross he had to bear on his way to the kingdom of heaven. All the work Jesus’s followers had after they started following him came from his, and then their, ministries in the world. Most neither starved to death nor retired to their country house, meaning that following the Way of Love might not make you, but probably wouldn’t break you. (Leave that to your neighbors’ envy and Roman crosses.) Come to think of it, few people who met Jesus or hung around with him got all that rich from it; the one who perhaps made out best of all was the groom at the wedding where he did his first miracle. That’s the one where Jesus

changed water into wine and never sent anyone a bill. Find a way to do that at scale, Jesus, and you just might have a going concern.

But that was not his path. *In vino* there may be *veritas* – in wine, there may be truth, at least once the wine-full start talking – but *non in vino divitiae*, at least not for us. Wine don't make you rich unless you're selling it. If you're the buyer, you'll pay twice: once in coin, and later on in time spent sleeping it off. Yet if you can, like Jesus, make something for free that makes people tell the truth, I mean – but I digress.

Anyway, back to our story. A Very Good Rich Boy has just learned from a Slightly Better but Poor Boy that he now has to sell all he has on earth if he wants to get treasure in heaven. Ever say the poor to the rich, you might say, and maybe Jesus be reading too much Tolstoy or something, but the question we need to ask ourselves is why. Why would selling all you get you closer to God? It sounds to me like all it would do is get you closer to the back of the breadline. Why? Well, if I have money enough to buy my daily bread, or pay the inkeep for the nightly roof I need over my head – I'm looking at you, Joseph; don't tell me “there was no room”; there's always room for them that can pay – anyway, if I can buy what I need, I'm less likely to go out and steal it, or pay the iron price for goods and shelter where I ought not do. I might even rip people off or tell lies in order to get that bottom tier of Maslow's hierarchy seen to. When you get right down to it, it's hard to see how poverty increases either morality or morale. So what gives?

Attachment, we figure. Playing at it, we also figure. It's easy to honor your father and mother and not kill anyone when you've got cash to stand on. Playing By The Rules, as Richie Rich here was doing, is easy when you don't have to also figure out how to make a living. But put need back into the equation, and all of a sudden we got a test of virtue going on. Can you do it, boy, when you're suddenly living on the edge? When you got no idea where your next meal is coming from? Give to the

poor until you become one, Jesus tells this dude to his face, and I guess we'll see.
(Positively 4th Street, if you ask me.)

Which brings me to another point. Have you ever been disappointed? Ever met someone you'd longed to meet, a writer whose work you admired, an actor or musician whose performances you'd thrilled to, a hero who turned out to be...normal? to have feet of clay? to be just...typical? Ordinary? Even flawed? If you have, and most of us have, you have a sense of what that Very Good Rich Boy felt when Jesus slapped him in the face and all but called him a fraud. He got no "Take up your mat and walk." He heard no "Go in peace; your sins are forgiven." He didn't leave with what Jesus said to the soldiers – "Be content with your pay." – or the comfort of hearing, "Your faith has set you free." No, what he got was, "You think you're so good, so righteous, so holier-than-thou? You've got a lot of nerve, so let me tell you something. I don't believe it. I don't believe a word of it. You obey all the laws that you think matter, but live comfortably and well in a world where a whole lot of people don't, and you do not care. Managing to get through the day without killing anybody or messing around with someone else's wife or husband, you nonetheless go home to wealth and all the pleasures and safety it can provide, and think you've done all you have to. You sit comfortable in your leopard-skin pill-box hat virtue, while millions lie exposed to the sun and the rain, parched for water, begging for food, with nowhere to bathe or relieve themselves, and don't think it's your problem at all. You sit at ease while thousands of refugees are flown from an underpass in Texas to the gang-ridden slums of Port-au-Prince *at your expense*, or innocent people blown away by drones *you paid for* and think, 'Geez, that's rough, but these things happen. Now, show me my money, for I am a Very Good Boy.' Or, more tragically, you sigh, as I sigh, at these cruelties visited on human lives no less human than ours, 'What can I do? What difference can I make? But I least I didn't, personally, fire the drone or the gun that killed the kids in that school

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or that family at the wedding, or stuff those people made like me in the image of God on that plane back to hell.” You bet Jesus told that VGRB to empty his coffers and get to the back of the line, learn how the rest of us really live, and answer the question once and for all, “Which side are you on?”

“You cannot serve both God and Mammon,” Jesus says elsewhere. “You cannot serve both God and money.” Why not? Because they are fundamentally different things. God is...God. The creator, source of light and life, love incarnate, the alpha and the omega, the ultimate good and the ultimate reason there is any good at all. Money is, well, money. You can’t eat it, can’t wear it, can’t drink it, and can’t shelter under it. It’s like fuel – methane, gasoline, coal – valuable only for what it can power, make happen, and get done, and always with unintended negative side-effects. The problem that the Rich Young Man / Very Good Boy had was not that he had money. It was that he did nothing with it, other than preserving his own well-being, and thought that all his exercise of virtue meant that he didn’t have to. He was addicted to the comfort and security that his wealth provided, and couldn’t grow until he learned how to be virtuous without that comfort and security. If we feel the sting of Jesus’s words to him, it may be that we have something to learn of that lesson as well.

Jesus did give him an out, before. He tried to warn him to be careful. He used an old rabbi’s trick, one any good teacher knows to bring out when a student is about to stumble into a Come to Jesus moment. When the VGRB called him, “Good teacher,” Jesus tossed it back at him as a question. “Why do you call me good? No-one is good but God.” A wise listener would’ve paused at that moment and thought, “That’s true – so, yeah, why do I? Why is he asking me this?” Instead, the VGRB kept talking when he ought to have been listening, and stumbled right into the trap Jesus set for him in that warning. What the young man is really saying is, “I am good,

teacher. See?” Calling Jesus “Good teacher” was just buttering him up, encouraging the rabbi to tell him what he wanted to hear: that he had done good while also doing well, and deserved what he had even though so many others didn’t have it. Jesus stared through him with the glare you’d on the eye of a needle, saw his weakness and pride, and nailed him with it.

Then he nailed everyone else with it, almost as an aside, with a phrase that has rung out ever since: “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” That is not because he thinks wealth is theft, though a considerable portion of it clearly is, as the release of the Pandora Papers last week, like the Panama Papers last year, has laid out in enraging detail. Those who serve Mammon to the full, these papers teach us, really do live the lives of villains in a Bond movie. Yet for Jesus, the reason the rich can’t get to heaven with their pockets full of gold is because even if wealth is obtained virtuously and held by virtuous people, those who have it tend to want to hold on to it rather than use it to help others. Most, he had seen, would rather exploit the poor than help them, and then as now convince themselves that doing so was the exercise of virtue. Their love of money, more than their fear of poverty, choked their spiritual growth at the root. hampering any effort to build a just and free society.

The prophet Amos, as we heard this morning, had their number way back in the day. He saw how the rich of his world “trampled on the poor and took from them levies of grain,” perverted justice so that it did nothing but serve wealth, and lied whenever they had to to make sure. He also knew that once such rot sets in, it stays until the whole edifice comes tumbling down. “You built houses of hewn stones, but you will not live in them. You planted pleasant vineyards, but you will not enjoy their wines.” Those from whom you ill-got will get you, or the Lord will, or true justice, your enemies, or someone who does to you what you did to them. When

they do, there will be none to defend you, and none to help you as you get used to getting by on nothing at all.

“For the love of money is the root of all evil,” wrote Paul to Timothy (1 Tim. 6:10). Not money itself, *per se*, but the love of it, that is. One does not love gasoline or methane. One uses them, ideally in a responsible manner, to do what they do best: run a car, heat a home, even make electricity to run the tools and toys that make our lives so much better. One does not hoard them and one does not waste them, except if one is full of fear or plans to do evil. As one has the power to do, one makes sure that those who need these fuels have enough – not too little, and not too much. Money to Jesus was like that. He and his team had what they needed and weren’t ashamed of it – remember that purse Judas is carrying, and never appears to actually skim from? – but they weren’t out there healing the sick and forgiving sins just to fleece the flock or stash trust funds where no creditor, law enforcer, or taxing authority could get at them. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give God what is God’s,” says Jesus on another occasion when the subject of money came pharisaically up. All that we have, and all that we’ve been able to do with it and get by it, has its ultimate source in God, who made all things good, even if some of the finest are also the most easily corrupted. If we do not do all the good we can with all the goods we have – virtues, talents, strengths, resources, skills, and what we know – then what good are they, and what good are we?

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus asked the VGRB, and with him all of us. Why? Because doing so reminds us that you are, and that we can be, and should be. We may not have to sell all we have and give it to the poor, just as we may not have to cut off our right hand if it causes us to stumble, in order to reach the kingdom of heaven. But we do have to use what we got, however we got it, to do all the good we can. *Amen.*