

“Give ‘Til It Helps”
Mark 10:17-31
November 8, 2015
W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

Our sermon title is “Give ‘Til It Helps”. It is a parody on that old slogan “Give ‘Til It Hurts”. Remember you may have worked for some non-profit that was talking about collecting money from people and told them, you really need to give until it hurts. You really need to give until you miss the money that you’re giving or the thing that you’re giving. You’re not really giving until you give until it hurts you a little bit. You know, I would have done that thing this year and then I remembered oh, I’ve already given that money away. So I couldn’t do it so I missed the money. Unless we give something away that hurts so the slogan goes. We really haven’t given much away at all.

Now on the other side of that the brighter side of that you could rejoice in the fact that you have given enough away that it hurts a little bit. You think to yourself I really didn’t need that thing after all. I just wanted it. It wasn’t something that I truly needed. Give til it helps you.

Some of you were here on World Communion Sunday, the first Sunday in October, when I told the story of a friend of mine who had a church member who gave the church a million dollars a year to spend on mission. He would send in a check and then go see the Pastor and say, “Richie, how are we going to spend this million dollars this year?” It was a magnificent gift and he did it every year for almost 20 years until he died. He had taken stock of his life at 55 and decided he had not done enough for the mission of Christ’s church. So they built a burn unit in Santo Domingo in memory of his wife, a nurses’ resident in India and a hospital in China to name just a few. He said the Lord had been good to him and he was going to give away 50% of what he earned the rest of his life.

But then he went on to tell my friend, and this is the main reason I am bringing this story up today, though it is a nice story for commitment Sunday about the million dollars isn’t it? The main reason is ... he told my friend, “That old saying *Give ‘Til It Hurts is bogus*. I believe in *Giving till it Helps*. It helps the person giving the money understand their need to give to do something outside themselves for other people and it helps the people receiving the money obviously. *Give ‘til it helps*.”

Now, take that little story and our sermon title of the morning and let it work its way in and out of this passage from Mark’s gospel. The story is a familiar one and often preached this time of the year. A rich man comes to Jesus and wants to know about Eternal Life. “How can I inherit eternal life? Is it something that I can do? Is it something that I can buy? Let me tote out some of my money for you Lord. Just tell me how I can possess eternal life?”

Jesus looked at the man and said, “You know the commandments: do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not kill, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother.” The man looked at Jesus and said with a smile, “All of these I have kept from my youth.” Wow! The man has

quite a religious resume doesn't he? Kept them all from his youth, but still doesn't know about the big question, eternal life?

What must I yet do? What more? Whatever I have done it is obviously not enough. Why else would I have this anxiety and emptiness that will not let me sleep at night and badgers me all day long? Give me something more to do! Give me another commandment that I can take into the sphere of my own sovereign will and obey. Give me some ethic to master, some goal to reach, some sacrifice to make, so that I can put my life in order to get it right.

Jesus looks at the man and says, "One thing you lack. Go, sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me." His countenance fell ... and he went away sorrowful. "Go, sell what you have, (maybe what has you) and give to the poor."

It was not the man's material possessions that stood in the way of his happiness or his inheriting eternal life, but his attachment to his material possessions. It is difficult to have possessions and not to love them. Diogenes said it in the 4th century B.C. and others have paraphrased it since, "If you own something that you cannot give away, then you don't own it; it owns you." And we can nod our heads and say "That is certainly true of our addiction to things like alcohol and cigarettes and other drugs. People are owned by them.

But, how about our houses, our cars, our I-Pads and I-phones and all the rest that begin with "I"? How would you feel about giving up a large salary to spend more time with your family? I once hired a man as a parking lot attendant because he had lost everything. Hadn't given it away but had lost it all. He told me he was owned by his job as a district manager for a large company and he was on the road or doing his job in the office 80 hours a week. His wife and children kept after him to do something about the situation but he didn't so they did, they left him. And the reason he had the job was gone. He woke up one morning and the house was empty and he was in the midst of a stressful breakdown. When he recovered enough to look for a job, he answered an ad in the paper and was applying for this 6 hour a day job. He asked me, "is there any stress related to this job, I am stressed out?" I looked at him and said, "The only stress would be if you happened to step out in front of a car driven by one of the excitable students on their way to class." He married sometime later, was happy and stayed in that stress free job for 32 years.

He gave up being owned by his work, it possessed him. He said, "I never knew who I was until I got away from that thing that owned me." It doesn't have to be as dramatic as taking a job as a parking lot attendant, there are only so many of those jobs anyway, but reducing stress in your life is a real thing.

So, why did the rich man in the scripture walk away from Jesus? Well, maybe the possessions gave him a sense of security. If something happens to our possessions then we are lost. It's a little like the pole vaulter who is stranded 14 feet in the air, he is over the bar but he is afraid to let go of the pole. He wants to hold on to the pole it is his security blanket, but the only way he can finish the jump is to let go.

The rich man comes to Jesus begging for assurance and peace of mind. Jesus sees his problem and tells him what to do about it. Why do you think Jesus answered the way he did? It was not to

test him, it was not to see how committed the man was. It was not because the poor needed his money. Jesus wanted to help the man see what was missing in his life. By giving away all that he had, he would finally be free from the things that had made him a slave. Jesus was asking him to give it away for freedom's sake.

I don't know what you think about this story from Mark's gospel? It doesn't sound very practical to give everything away does it? Jesus did give the man an alternative. He said, "Go, sell ... and come follow me." That's what the disciples had done.

Before we say, "Bad choice, Buster," to that rich man, we had best examine what we would have done—or better yet, are doing. Possessions are the summum bonum of an affluent society. Is there anything closer to us than our possessions? Does anything possess us more than our possessions? Not really, in many cases. Everything from our security to our social status is tied to what we have and own. Possessions, from money to material goods, are the bulwark between ourselves and poverty.

We are ordinary woman and men who have lots of stuff, who have come to Jesus to be taught. Each of us has gotten out of bed and come to church in order to be taught by Jesus. We come to Jesus asking, "Good Teacher, what must we do to be faithful followers of your way?" Or, "Good Teacher, how can I better understand the Bible?"

The rich man comes to Jesus as a sincere seeker to be taught and the class ends in failure. It is the only call story in Mark where someone rejects the call. This man, maybe young maybe rich is being asked to follow Jesus. But he was startled and shocked by what Jesus asked of him. So he refuses and the reason was money. This is bad news, it's how our material attachments, our false loves and obsessions, keep us from following Jesus.

But this bad news is not our bad news. We are not like the rich man in the story ... who when asking an idle theological question, was shocked and grieved by the strange answer. Unlike him, when Jesus called us, we didn't slink away but came forward. We let go of some things to be embraced by Jesus. We stayed the course, kept attending class, even took some notes, even when we were startled by what we read attributed to Jesus ... *love your enemies, go the 2nd mile, give food to a stranger, visit those in prison* Some Sundays we wanted to walk away, go another direction, sleep in late, because that way it would be easier than to be confronted by the sometimes shocking and demanding words of this "Good Teacher." But we did not. We stayed the course. We kept at it. We're still here. And then Jesus says, "Rejoice!"

The story does not end in depression and grieving. The story ends in rejoicing! Jesus says to us, "I promise you, for everything you have given up, I will give you much more. For everything you have turned your back upon. I will give you much more. Rejoice!"

The story seems to imply, if you want to feel bad, be grieved, then grieve for those poor souls who have little more to live and die for than their stuff, their possessions, their own selfish selves. You get to give your lives for Jesus! You get to follow where he is going. You get to swim against the stream. You get to be part of a grand revolution of changing this world!

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about this passage, “Eternal life is God’s gift, to be given to whomever God pleases, for whatever reasons please God. The catch is, you have got to be free to receive the gift. You cannot be otherwise engaged. You cannot be tied up right now or too tied down to respond. You cannot accept God’s gift if you don’t have an empty hand to take it. You cannot make room for it if all your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go.

“That is why the rich ruler went away sorrowful, if you ask me; because he understood all at once that he was not free. His wealth was supposed to make him free, but kneeling in front of Jesus he understood it was not so. Invited to follow, he went away sorrowful instead, for he had great possessions that he lugged behind him like a ball and chain. He could not believe that the opposite of rich might not be poor ... but free.”

“Give ‘Til It Helps” ... YOU! Jesus did not demand it of the rich man, it was not a test, not because others needed his money. It’s a gift, a promise. It’s Jesus telling you a secret. Giving up what has possession of you so that ... you can come and follow me.