

The story of the rich ruler who wanted to be good, who wanted to have everlasting life, but who loved his wealth too much to follow Jesus. When I first heard this story as a young girl, my family attended a small Bible church near Chimayo in northern New Mexico. The church itself met in what I think had been the square adobe auditorium of an old Mission school; in the shade of a few cottonwood trees crickets and peacocks were our Sunday morning accompaniment, fine reddish dirt settled on the cars in the unpaved lot, flies buzzed along the window sills, and the children (I one of them) hunted lizards in the sand as our parents socialized over black coffee in styrofoam cups. What a gift that childhood was, surrounded by simple things, and simple love. In that childhood, I heard this story and thought, with full earnestness: “Good thing I’m not rich! Don’t want to be like that guy!”

I don’t know about you, but as an adult in the city of Boston, in this utterly different urban world, I somehow don’t find myself thinking ‘Good thing I’m not rich.’ Most days the thoughts I have are more like: ‘How can I get just a little bit more?.. or even better a lot more?!’ on my tax-return, on the sale rack looking for the best deal, in the grocery store, when the pomegranates are priced per each, looking for the biggest piece of fruit. Hearing this story as an adult, about the good rich man who was made sad by his attachment to his many possessions, I know about my own greed. I know now that rich or not rich, I am more like this man than I want to believe: that I stake too much in my own goodness, that I love the things I have more than I should, that I just like this rich man would be unable to give it all up for the sake of Christ. How disappointing to find myself on the wrong side of the story after all.

There is a silver lining I suppose: here in the complexity of adulthood, I am surprised in new ways by the man's question and by Christ's reply: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Inherit? It's an interesting question, a psychological question: "teacher, how can I get God to give me the big prize? How can I get God to write me into the will?" Already he's asking the wrong question. And like a skilled doctor, Jesus begins the process of diagnosing this man's spiritual shortcomings, picking up on the man's flattery: "Good teacher"-- "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.'" The man insists: 'I am good. I have followed all of these commandments since my youth.'

Having located the weakness, Jesus extends an invitation: "Join us." Actually what he says is, "There is still one thing lacking: sell all that you own, and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Come, join us. Jesus loved him. What an opportunity! An invitation to belong among the followers of a great historic leader. But the man knows himself well enough to be filled with sorrow. Accepting this invitation comes at too high a price. Sell his possessions and give the money to the poor? He just can't do it. What he came looking for was an inheritance.

Life together comes at a cost. And each of us must give up something of ourselves to have a place in the group. Being together requires compromise. Often, what we must give up is that thing we cling to most desperately. This could be something so close to our sense of self that even the idea of giving it up feels annihilating. We might be asked to give up our personal success stories, to leave behind our most treasured accomplishments. In this country our great inheritance is the American Dream--the dream which says that individuals can make it, that rewards are promised to those who pull themselves up by the bootstraps, and with hard work, ingenuity, and self-invention, make something of themselves. It is a very seductive dream--one that makes the individual more powerful than the odds against him or her. Once we have made a life according to self-reliance, we are destined to feel that all we have is *ours* that we deserve what we have and more. Much in our culture preferences the great story of the individual over other stories: of community, of cooperation, of neighborliness, even of family. What if belonging to the beloved community, required us to give up our sense of self-reliance? What if we even had to experience ourselves as dependents? What would it take for us to trust one another more than we trust ourselves?

Some of you may know that when I am not at King's Chapel, I am studying psychoanalysis. In the early part of my on-going psychoanalytic training, I completed a fieldwork requirement in group homes. For two years, I met weekly with individuals afflicted by long-term mental illnesses; many of them had been living with schizophrenia for their entire adult lives. My task was simple: by spending time together, regularly, I was to learn how to be with each of them. I would say now, looking back, that each of them required me to give up, for that hour each week, a particular part of myself. One man was especially challenging--each week when I came in he would quiz me aggressively--demanding that I complete his thoughts, hulking over me with an intensity I found frightening. The experience was bewildering; never in my life had I felt so dense, so tongue-tied and inarticulate.. It seemed I could never say the right thing, and if I said nothing at all it was worse for him. Eventually, in our second year together, we settled into a more comfortable routine playing rounds of "Go Fish". He waited with his pack of cards for me to arrive, and then we took turns while he talked about his week. "got any two's?" "Nope, go fish." Sometimes, I won and he grew silent. Sometimes, he won, and what happened then was quite something: Overcome with glee, both hands in the air, grin across his face, he would cheer for himself "Hooray, I win! I'm smart! You can't think as well as I can." What this person needed more than anything was to feel smart enough, capable enough. He needed to feel like a winner. What I had to give up to be with him was my feeling that I was smarter, more capable, and more of a winner than he was. I had to feel as inept, as much of a loser, as this person probably really felt. For me, the price of being together for one hour each week was excruciatingly high--I had to give up my prized intellect, my self confidence, my wit. What I gained was a much richer understanding of this person's experience. What I gained was nothing less than a capacity for empathy. Once I had given up my prizes, and grieved them, I was surprised to find that I felt liberated--open to new experiences I had never imagined. So perhaps there is a bit of hope for us? Perhaps, we are not all doomed to say "No", to live the rich man's sorrow.

Come. Join us. What would you have to give up to follow Christ? To belong to the beloved community?

It is very hard to give up the legends we tell ourselves about ourselves. But whatever we can accomplish together is always greater than what we can accomplish alone. The cost of being together, of compromising for the sake of being together, is scary--it usually requires us to change.

Like the rich man.

It takes a great deal of courage.

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich individual to enter the kingdom of God. There is no room in God's kingdom for an inflated, camel-sized ego. Because entering the kingdom of God means, being part of the group. Coming with us. And giving yourself to the beloved community is what allows each of us to transcend our profound limitations as humble individuals before God. It will change you. It will make us great. Amen