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“You Probably Think This Sermon Is About You” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (10/13/2024, The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

The first number one song in the year 1973 and it was there for three weeks, was a song that featured Mick Jagger on backing vocals, a German bass player, but you know it as

Carly Simon's Your Song.

And the lyric that was quite well known is Your Song, well done there, over, I know,

I see you, I love you, I know you, she's singing along with me in her heart.

Your Song, you probably think this song is about you.

It's the anthem for narcissists everywhere and while most of us maybe will not be diagnosed

clinically as people with narcissistic personality disorder, certainly we can relate to that

thing about human beings, all human beings, that makes us pretty self-absorbed, kind of

wrapped up in ourselves.

It's really natural to ask in situations, we find it, it's a reflex, we don't even have

to try and think to do it, we just automatically think, how does this affect me?

How does this new government policy affect me?

Oh, it doesn't, never mind.

But if it does, then I care about it.

And in big things, little things, always, how does this affect me?

There's an old New Yorker cartoon by one of my favorite cartoonists, Ross Chast, and

in it, it's a sample of greeting cards from Narcissist cards incorporated.

And the first one, wow, your birthday's really close to mine.

Then inside, isn't that amazing?

And the sympathy card says, I once had a sad thing happen to me too.

And then inside, I can't, I can hardly speak about it without crying.

And then the last one, my favorite, speaking of Bon Voyage, guess where I'm going?
And then you open inside, France.
We don't send cards like this, but often we act like this.
You're waiting for the other person to stop talking.
So you can tell your story, which is even better than theirs.
This attitude was conveyed in a more recent pop song by Silksonic, which, as you know, Bruno Mars and Anderson Pock.
And it's a song called Fly As Me, Fly, for those of you that don't know, is a term that means sort of good looking, popular, cool, all that.
Hail fellow, well met, as they used to say, but now they just shortened it to Fly.
In which they sing, I deserve to be with someone as Fly as me.
And you deserve to be seen with someone as Fly as me.
We tend to make things about us.
We're taught to do this.
We do it pretty naturally, but I just heard the Surgeon General issued a public health warning about parenting, that the way people parent today, it has a name, it's called intensive parenting.
You know, if you've seen Mad Men, you know how it used to be like the parents would be having their cocktail and the kids would just be watching TV completely unsupervised and maybe that wasn't the best way of doing things.
But intensive parenting is that everything is always sort of focused on the kids in a way that is all consuming, the sports, the tutoring, the extracurriculars, all of it at all times.
And parents are made to feel that their child's success or failure in life is 100% dependent on them being perfect parents all the time.
And what the Surgeon General said is people are so stressed, they're anxiety and depression from the law that they feel, that they must be perfect parents at all times, is so overwhelming that it creates diagnosable levels of stress and anxiety.
And he points out that studies show that in some cultures, hunter-gatherers, for example, where kids are sort of ignored, they just play on their own or get bored or whatever, but they tend to do better.
So just be hunter-gatherers, that's what I'm saying.
So whether you have been intensively parented so that you think the world is all about you all the time because it always did revolve around you and your childhood, or maybe you just

picked that up on your own, it seems like human beings have figured out that they're the best and everything's about them just on their own. You can observe this when you're driving. You think everybody else is traffic, but you have a legitimate right to be there. Right? It's about me. I'm fine. Everybody else is the problem. So the thing about this way of life is that it tends to, it's very lonely. If it's all about you and you have no real room for relationship because you filled up the whole space, we meet somebody like this in the Gospel of Mark today in chapter 10. The story that is commonly told as being about the rich young ruler, if you read Mark's Gospel, he is neither mentioned as young or a ruler, so just read your Bibles. He's just a man that runs up to Jesus and he asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. And the thing about this, what the bystanders would have seen seems like a pretty good guy. He runs to Jesus. It's a level of urgency that I like to see. Also he kneels before the Lord. He shows this piety. He says, good teacher. He shows him deferential respect. And then he asks a really good question. He doesn't waste his one moment with Jesus, like in Christmas story where the kid can't remember what he wants to ask Santa Claus because he panics. If you get a moment with Jesus, you want to ask for the right thing, you got one chance. And he doesn't blow it. He doesn't ask for help me find my soulmate or let me, not that's a bad thing. Maybe a better one help my team get to a bowl game. That's not what he asks. He asks for eternal life. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Great question. So the crowd and the disciples would have thought, gosh, what an upstanding guy. What a blessed guy. But Jesus kind of pops the balloon. And he sees that this man is actually rather turned in on himself,

what St. Augustine's
called, incervatus in say.
He's turned in on himself.
I mean, his question is not, how do I serve others?
How do I love my neighbor?
His question is, how do I get a gold star?
What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?
It's a question about himself.
And Jesus begins to help him maybe see this or maybe he's inviting him
into some self-awareness.
He begins by saying, first of all, don't call me good.
There's only one person who's good, and that is God, person of the
capital P. So already
he's beginning to say, you may think you're a good guy, but maybe
you're not such a good
guy.
There's only one being that is good.
And then he says, you know the commandments.
And Jesus lists them.
He lists the six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and then back to five,
which you knew when
you heard it read.
But he says, you know the commandments.
Don't murder.
Don't commit adultery.
Don't steal.
Don't lie.
Don't defraud, which is actually not the commandment, but don't covet.
But we'll just say it is number ten.
And then backing up to number five, honor your father and mother.
The thing, the man then responds to this, says, yep, I've done all
that.
Perfect track record.
I've done them all.
But here's the thing, Jesus names all the commandments on the second
tablet.
He doesn't name any of the ones on the first tablet, and where there
are two tablets.
And the first tablet is all about putting God first.
It's all about, I'm the Lord your God, you should have no other God
but me, don't make
any idols, don't take the Lord's name in vain, keep the Sabbath, all
these things are
about loving God with all your heart, not worshiping things that are
not God and don't
treat God like some divine vending machine that's there to give you
what you want.
They're all commandments about where your heart is focused.
Is it focused on yourself or is it focused on God?
What do you love, essentially?

And Jesus wants this man to see, to use a theological term.
He wants to see that his priorities are whack.
They're out of line, they are flipped.
He's put himself first, and to help this guy see that he's forgotten
the first tablet
of commandments that his priorities are out of whack, he gives him a
sermon application.
And it is a doozy.
This is not an alter call or an invitation to quit social media for a
month.
He says, I want you to go home, put your house on the market, have a
state sale of all
your possessions, liquidate your IRA, pay whatever penalty there is
for withdrawing it early,
take all that money and don't reinvest it in cryptocurrency, the way
of the future.
None of that.
He says, take all of that, proceed, and then go down to Goodwill and
East Wake on Waco
Drive and hand them a big check.
Give it all away.
Come follow me, that is a sermon application.
He's inviting him to do what Phil Collins sang in the beautiful years
that he was the
lead singer for Genesis.
No shame to Peter Gabriel, but Phil Collins my guy.
And he said in 1986, you're throwing it all away and that's what Jesus
invites him to
do.
Throw it all away.
It's crazy.
It's ridiculous.
It's insane.
But what he's trying to reveal is that his heart was helping this man
see because it says
he goes away, crest fall, and he goes away sad.
The passage says because he had many possessions.
What he's trying to reveal to this man is that his heart is fully
consumed with his riches,
his wealth, his possessions, and that's really what he's holding on
to.
His life is about himself.
I'm keeping all the rules, the ones that other people can see that I'm
keeping, and I'm
focused on my stuff, but my heart really loves me and my stuff and not
God.
And see the thing about Jesus is he's inviting him to freedom.
You remember what Texas native, Janice Chaplin said, freedom is
another word for nothing
left to lose?

And he's inviting, Jesus is inviting him to that space of freedom
where you could rest
and trust God.
We do this in our baptismal covenant.
If you've seen a baptism here at St. Albans, you've seen the minister
ask the person
being baptized, do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your
Savior?
I do.
And do you put your whole trust in his grace and his love?
I do.
We don't say do you put 60 to 70% of your trust in his grace and love?
We ask you to give it all, which is what Christianity is about.
It's about giving up yourself.
Jesus says, pick up your cross and follow me.
That doesn't say just like start having a quiet time, which you don't
like.
So it's hard and it's a burden.
That's the suffering Jesus is calling you to do.
That's pick up your cross means die.
Give up yourself.
Give up yourself in psychological terms, sublimate your ego, put that
down, put others first.
And this is hard.
It's hard for everyone.
And you can see this the way the disciples react.
We tend to read this as a passage that just applies to rich people.
As it says, it's harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than a rich person
to enter the kingdom of heaven.
Meaning it's harder for a camel to go through a really tiny space than
it would be for a
rich person to live in the way that God wants the world to be.
The disciples though get that this doesn't just apply to rich people
because they say who
then can be saved in verse 26.
They're astounded.
They realize it applies to everyone because everybody, so rich people
may have a certain
relationship to their possessions that's all consuming, but I've known
plenty of people
that are not maybe in that tax bracket that still have an all-
consuming relationship
with their possessions or lack thereof.
So they say who then can be saved?
This applies to everyone.
We all trust God up to a point.
We hedge our bets.
And Jesus here then gives the good news of the gospel.
He says, you're right.

It is impossible.

It's impossible for anyone, rich poor middle class in between whatever.

It's impossible.

He says, for mortals it is impossible, but not for God, for God, all things are possible.

God is the one who does this work.

So if Christianity is about giving ourselves away, getting out of that vanity of being

turned in on ourselves, it's impossible.

And Jesus offers us this gift that He then goes to give Himself away for us.

That's what that reading Hebrews about, our great high priest.

He goes to make a way for us so that we can approach the throne, not of judgment, but of grace.

We are like the man in the story.

We are so wedded to things that are not God.

We're so turned in on ourselves.

And the miracle to me is that the sermon application, like any good preaching of God's

law, is not really intended as something that you can actually do.

Jesus is inviting you to see that you can't, but that you have a Savior in Christ.

And you know this because of what Mark records.

This beautiful little two words when Jesus says, before He even says this, go sell all you have.

It says, Jesus, looking at Him, loved Him, and said, go, sell your possessions.

He sees Him.

He loves Him.

And that's where this comes from.

And Jesus is inviting Him to come to the end of Himself and realize He needs a Savior.

Every year in the fall, we have stewardship season, which we're in now.

And it's amazing to me that the readings from the lectionary in the fall are always about money and possessions.

It's like someone planned it.

There wasn't me.

There's a lectionary committee in heaven that decides what the readings are going to be throughout the whole year.

But in the fall, it is always the case.

We get into these teachings of Jesus because He taught a lot about this stuff.

He talked about it a lot.

And I could use this passage to say, hey, look at this.

Your stuff has a grip on you.
So take that pledge card and put an extra zero to the left of the decimal.
Give it away.
And if I said your stuff has a grip on you, I would probably be right.
Has a grip on all of us.
But the thing that this passage shows us is if you got to that place where you did,
you know, maybe you filled out that pledge card and really went the extra mile on it,
you would probably be like this man in the story.
I have kept the commandment.
Look at me, doing better than these other people.
So I would say, sure, give your stuff away, fill out that pledge card, be generous.
Drop some of those burdens.
But know this, the main thing from this passage.
What Jesus shows us is that to do this thing of giving up ourselves on our own is impossible.
But there is one who has given up himself wholly and entirely for us.
So that even when you do have a hard time giving it away, then you will.
It hurts a little bit to give up yourself, to die to your ego.
But even when you have a hard time, you will find that he has already given it all away
for you.
So when you read Mark 10 and you read this passage, you are so vain, you probably think it's about you.
And to some extent, it is and can be.
But even more so, it's about this one who looks at you and who loves you.
And even when you fail to give it all away, he gives it all away for you.
Let us pray.
Almighty God, buy your grace where we are holding on to things too tightly, help us to open our hands.
And buy your grace, enable us to hear the word of your great love for us.
We pray in all things we would be aware of this.
In Christ's name, amen.