

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Just Browsing”

October 11, 2009

Reverend Art Ritter

Mark 10:17-31

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’¹⁸ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.’¹⁹ You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.”²⁰ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

28 Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’²⁹ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.’³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

Stacey Simpson, a Baptist minister from Georgia, remembers the first time she read the Bible story that we heard today, the tale of the rich, young ruler. She was seven years old and was reading the Bible as part of her bedtime routine. When she got to the end of the story she read the words, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” She was so alarmed that she slammed her Bible shut, ran out of bed, and went into her mother’s room, awakening her from a sound sleep. “Mother,” she whispered urgently, “Jesus said that rich people don’t go to heaven.” Her mother’s response, “Don’t worry. We aren’t rich. Go back to bed.”

When I was younger man, I dreamed of having a son. I remembered most fondly playing catch in the front yard with my father, sitting beside him at the high school football games, and helping him rake up all of the leaves in the fall. I imagined what it would be like doing those same things with my own son. Instead God blessed me with two wonderful daughters. I am thankful each day for them. You might be thinking that my girls could do the same things I wished a son to do- play catch, watch football and rake leaves. I suppose that could be true but in this case it isn't. But I have learned that my girls like to do other things; like spend hours talking and texting on the phone, watching strange television shows about other teenagers, and dancing and singing show tunes in the style of Ethel Merman.

There is one more thing that I know girls prefer to do. And that is one of the things this father detests the most. Shopping. My idea of shopping is to figure out exactly what I need, save the money for it, determine which store carries the product, go to that particular store, walk in and buy the item, and then leave. It really is quite simple. My daughters' idea of shopping is to go to the mall, stop by a dozen different stores, glance at things they weren't really looking for, try on a bunch of clothes including things they don't intend to buy, look at themselves in the mirror, change their minds several times, return to the very first store they visited, and then buy an item that they will probably return next week. It is maddening for me!

I once read an article that describes this kind of behavior as "safe shopping." Although if you look at my credit card bills after one of Amelia's shopping trip you would not call it safe. However one participates in "safe shopping" when one enters a store without an exact intention to buy. "Safe shoppers" find less joy in buying something than they do in examining the plethora of choices that are available to them. A "safe shopper" when confronted by a store clerk would say, "No thank you, I don't need any help. I am just browsing."

This morning's Gospel lesson is the story of the rich, young man. Jesus and his disciples are on the road to Jerusalem, a road that will lead Jesus to crucifixion, to suffering, and to death. A young man appears before him. All that we are told about this man is that he is young and rich. He sounds like he might have been the perfect candidate for the television show, *The Bachelor*. But he comes to Jesus seeking wisdom about how to obtain eternal life.

Jesus tells him that in order to have eternal life, he must keep all of the commandments. This in itself would be a major accomplishment! But the young man remarks that he as indeed kept all of the commandments from his earliest days of youth. It is then when Jesus looks upon him differently, Scripture says he "loved him." Perhaps Jesus was taken with the young man's sincerity and wanted only the best for him. Wanting to help him, wanting to give him the very best of advice, Jesus tells the young man to sell all that he has, to give it to the poor, and then come to follow Jesus. The rich, young man was stunned. This was too much to take. It was more than he was bargaining for. He went away grieving.

As I mentioned, we don't know much about this young man. He was rich. Evidently he was successful at whatever work he did. His bank account provided his comfort and security. He was a good boy. Since childhood he had sought perfection in his behavior. But even though he has mastered the finer points of the law, he wasn't satisfied with his life. Something inside of him was seeking a greater truth. We might

say that he was out safe shopping for something that would bring him greater personal fulfillment.

The young man's quest isn't all that strange to us. Sociologist Robert Bellah, in his books *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*, writes of our modern American desire to get the most out of our life. We want to be the best. We want to achieve the highest. We are so intent on fulfilling our potential and our destiny, that we put our worldly plans above everything else. Theologian Walter Wink says it in a different and more positive way. He writes that we spend the first part of our life asking the question, "What is the meaning of life?" The question for the second half of our life is "With the time I have left, how can I make a difference?" No matter how we ask the question, we are shopping for fulfillment, browsing the worldly and cultural possibilities that are before us. Like the rich, young man we are shopping for truth but not really ready to buy.

And then Jesus presents a challenge. Stop browsing and start buying. Stop fiddling with the business plans and the over programmed schedule. Forget acquiring things to make yourself secure and make the commitment to something much bigger than you. Let go of all of the stuff that makes you feel important and successful and come follow me.

Liberation theologian Dorothee Solle wrote, "If my hands are fully occupied holding onto something, I can neither give nor receive." This may be what Jesus was trying to tell the rich, young man. This may be what God wants us all to know. Our browsing of choices to make ourselves complete and happy and successful only leaves our arms full of regret and weariness. Let it go to embrace the love of God.

One of the new television shows that I have become interested in is called *The Shark Tank*. In the show, entrepreneurs try to sell their ideas and products to investors in an effort to become successful and possibly rich. I am almost ashamed to admit that I find it fascinating. More than once the entrepreneur seeking the investment has caught the fancy of the would-be investors but is unable to clinch the big money deal. The reason is that the people who have created the product are so attached to it that they have an inflated value of its worth. They are so attached to it that they cannot stand the emotional pain of watching someone else take over. They can browse for a deal but they can't buy it. They can't let go so they sadly walk away with their lives unchanged.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that Jesus' words to the rich, young man were "a rich prescription...designed to melt the lump in his throat and the knot in his stomach by dissolving the burden on his back...It is a dare to him to become a new creature, defined in a new way, to trade in all the words that have described him for now- wealthy, committed, cultured, responsible, educated, powerful, obedient- to trade them in on one radically different word-free."

I heard a television news story this week about a terrible affliction which is striking our society these days. It is called either *Facebook* or *Twitter* anxiety. It seems that many who use these particular internet social groups are finding themselves under pressure to produce and regularly communicate an exciting status or an entertaining thought which will prove to all of the friends and associates that they indeed live a life that others might envy. People are filled with worry about posting regularly something that will be worthy of notice. They are so consumed with appearances so busy trying to

be something or somebody that they become detached from life, missing the reality of things that pass before them.

Evangelist Tony Campolo tells of a friend of his who had to take a bus trip across central India. He was in an old model bus which was packed with people, packages, furniture, and even a few farm animals. Sitting across from Tony's friend was a tired man who had a neatly wrapped package sitting on the luggage rack over his head. The man kept nodding off and each time when he would wake up, he would do so in a panic, fearing that his package had been stolen. This went on for hours. But eventually he fell asleep. When he awoke his package was missing from the luggage rack. Momentarily he panicked as he realized that he had been robbed. But, being relieved that the thing that caused him constant worry was now gone, he settled back into his seat, totally relaxed and with a sense of joy he fell into a prolonged, wonderful sleep.

The rich young man wasn't ready to buy the truth Jesus was selling. He wasn't willing to let go of that which he possessed to purchase that which was eternal. He hoped that the one thing he lacked was a personality trait or something he could change about himself. He hoped he could find the one thing lacking in a shopping trip for wisdom and truth. But he was only browsing. He wasn't ready to let go of his own self-produced security to reach out and accept the one thing he was missing. He wasn't ready to invest in the one thing he could have for free-God's accepting grace.