

## The Last Shall Be First

[Hebrews, 4:12-16](#), [Mark 10:17-31](#)

There is a show on television I watch on occasion. It is called 'Mission: Organization'. Someone usually calls in the experts because he/she is completely disorganized and can't see a way to bring order to their world. Usually the lead woman comes in to assess the 'situation' (and often it is not a room or apartment but a 'situation'), and then she determines which expert to call in to save the day. If any of you have seen a show like this, or have decided to remodel a room or a closet, or are preparing to move, what is the first thing you do to that space? You empty it. You get rid of everything down to the bare walls and floor and start over.

I often wonder when I watch this show, how things could get so bad. Some of these homes have no room to even walk much less function in because of all the clutter. When you are

preparing to sell your home, they often will tell you to de-clutter because everyone prefers a neat, orderly home pared-down to basic essentials to show off its roominess. Yet as a nation we tend to accumulate stuff. During recessions such as the one we are living through, yard sales and garage sales become popular as we take a serious look at what we have and what we can live without. For most of us, we have stuff. That is not a problem at all.

The young man who approached Jesus in our gospel lesson also had stuff. He was described as a rich young ruler having many possessions. Yet the man was in need of something from Jesus. The scripture tells us he came running to Jesus. If this was truly a wealthy, young ruler, I would think he would not often run after anyone as he was typically in charge and many would come to him. But we find this young man desperate to

speaking with Jesus. Why? What was he looking for? He had plenty of wealth, riches, and comfort in this life, yet he was seeking the way to inherit eternal life.

There was a practice in the early church that ultimately led to a split between what is now considered the Catholic denomination and the Protestant movement that began with a Catholic priest known as Martin Luther. Part of the issue was that of 'buying indulgences'. At the time, there was an allowance that if you committed a sin you were allowed to pay an amount of money for a priest to conduct a special Mass to absolve you of your sin and/or reduce your time in purgatory. Hence, the wealthy had a greater advantage and line to God simply by paying for it. Luther posted what is now called his 95 theses on the front doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on All Hallows' Eve – the day before All Saints' Day

which today is known as Halloween. The general idea appeared to be that those with money could buy their way to forgiveness and Luther spoke out against this practice. This caused Luther to be excommunicated in 1520 and initiated the Protestant Movement. Luther literally gave up all he had to follow his calling to Christ.

And so, this young, wealthy man wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. After some discussion, Jesus reminded him of several of the commandments that the young man could emphatically answer – “Yes, I have kept those commandments since my youth.” This was a good man. He understood the law and kept the basic commandments. Did you notice the one Jesus did not mention? The first commandments say to love and serve God and only God – ‘you are to have no other gods before me.’ Jesus was said to have shown love to this man. It seems Jesus

certainly wanted him to become a true follower. Yet many will say Jesus put an impossible task in front of this young man.

“Sell all that you own and give the money to the poor, then *take up your cross* and follow me.” What is Jesus telling this man?

Jesus is saying, ‘Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.’ Put God first in your life. ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness and all these things shall be added to you.’

We have stuff, and sometimes that stuff gets in the way of God’s will for our lives. What is most important to us? Is it serving God? Is it caring for our neighbors? Is it living in the faith that God will provide for God’s people? We are quickly approaching the holy season of Advent. What does Advent mean? Why can’t we just blaze on to the celebration of Christmas? Perhaps there is a need for a cleansing. Perhaps we

need a time to clear out the clutter of worry or fear or heartache. Perhaps we need to re-experience the wonder of the birth of the Christ-child. Perhaps – just perhaps – we need to consider that what we are celebrating doesn't depend on stuff.

I would like to go out on a limb a little and challenge us all to have a frugal Christmas. I remember one Christmas with my family when we finally had a discussion that all of us had wanted to have but everyone was afraid to speak up. Every year my side of the family gathers at our home on Christmas night. Many of us were becoming more and more strapped financially yet we continued to feel obligated to exchange gifts. Finally, we spoke up and realized that we were all worrying for nothing. None of us were in need of basic necessities, and the beauty of Christmas for us was simply getting together as a family, eating a great meal, playing music, and blending generations together

as a true family. What we each valued more than the gifts was each other.

So I challenge all of us to have a frugal Christmas. It is no secret that the recession continues on. We are starting to see signs of recovery, but it seems perhaps there has been some good in this process, for as a nation maybe we have seen what we truly can live without and still be ok. Yes, there will be gifts under our tree this year (guys, you can breathe easy!), but I do not intend to go into debt to buy ‘stuff’. God provides for our needs and at times provides for our wants. As a pastor I am truly grateful for the hand of God in putting us together as a congregation. As a parent I am truly grateful for the opportunity to see my children grow and mature into adults. As a student I can say I am grateful for the opportunity to learn as I have never learned before (remind me of this during finals week!). And as

a Christian I am truly grateful for the comfort and strength of God even through my cluttered periods, when I could not see God in the midst of struggle because of all the ‘stuff’ that would get in the way.

The message Jesus leaves with the wealthy young ruler seems harsh. Jesus was telling him to trust God, because God needs to be first in our lives. Jesus was telling him that there will be times of difficulty in this life, but if we put God first, all will be well. It seems the young man could not give up his treasures on earth and put God first in his life. Can we? Can we trust God more than we trust ourselves to take care of our needs? At times it is easy to pray to God for something, only to get up from our knees and take the problem back to solve ourselves. It is time to clear out the clutter and make room in our hearts for the Savior.

I like the last verse read for us from the gospel of Mark.

“But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

We have ideas of status and importance, and once again Jesus turns our ideas upside down. Jesus came for the least, the last, and the lost. I’ve shared the words of this song before, but perhaps in closing we can sing them together:

“Just as I am without one plea

But that thy blood was shed for me

And that thou bidst me come to thee

O lamb of God I come, I come.” Let us pray.