

“The Power of Generosity”

The Reverend Peter Cook
Sunday, October 14, 2012
The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷As 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?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, 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.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus 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, ³⁰who 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. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Like most people, I want my life to have meaning and purpose. Living a meaningful and purposeful life was on the mind of the man who approached Jesus.

“Good teacher”, the man asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” For Jesus, Eternal life is not about the things we must do in order to get to heaven. If we live by God’s radical grace, we do not have to earn anything or do anything to get to heaven. Instead, eternal life is a gift freely given to all from God.

When the man referred to Jesus as “Good teacher”, Jesus responded by asking the man, “why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

Jesus was trying to say that none of us, including Jesus, can ever hope to rise to the level of goodness that belongs to God alone. For Jesus it’s a dangerous and idolatrous game we play when we start deciding who will go to heaven and who will not based on our assessment of people’s goodness.

While this is an obsession of some Christians, we must remember that this was not Jesus’ obsession. Eternal life instead, is about our response to the gift God has already given and then how we seek to create heaven here on earth.

The great Protestant theologian John Calvin would put it this way. We have already received the abundant grace of God. It is impossible to earn this grace because it is freely given. It’s all gift.

Calvin goes on to ask, how is it that we will respond to this amazing grace we have already received? Responding to God’s grace, how is it that we will create what Calvin would call the city of God here on earth?

Having known the radical love of God in our lives, how will we create a just world and a more moral society? When we come to church, we experience the grace of God in part through the word of God. This is a gift in itself.

We gather here to consider how we will respond to the word of God by living a moral and purposeful life. We might consider the commandments the man discusses with Jesus.

As we pray on God’s word, we could talk about how we should not murder. If we take this commandment seriously, we need to talk about the violence in our cities.

We must also deal with the great questions of war and peace. Is war ever justified to protect others from harm? Is pacifism a valid principle in a dangerous world? How as a society can we encourage peaceable rather than violent responses to the stresses of this world?

As we wrestle with these questions, what will we do to create a more peaceful world?

As we pray on God’s word, we could speak against adultery. If we take this commandment seriously, how can we counter the forces in our lives and our souls that may tempt us to be unfaithful?

How can we find the strength to live with fidelity and make a decision to love well?

As we pray on God's word, we could talk about how we should not steal. Obviously we could talk about petty theft and shoplifting, or defrauding customers, homeowners or investors. We could also talk about global inequities where one country takes from another.

How can we temper our greed and give back what does not belong to us? As we pray on God's word, we could also talk about how we should not bear false witness that diminishes our souls and that of others.

How do we rigorously seek and share the truth with others? And could we also talk about the importance and complexity of honoring our fathers and mothers?

From this pulpit you can count on the fact that we will be wrestling with all these commandments and many other scriptural principles as we try to live a purposeful and moral life in our private lives and out in the public square.

But today, there is another topic that we need to talk about. Money: The use and the abuse of money.

Jesus told the man indeed he was faithful in following the commandments but Jesus said there was one thing he lacked. Sell what you own and give the money to the poor. Now that is a difficult conversation.

Talking about our use of money is really hard. Oh Jesus said, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone with some money, indeed any money, to enter the kingdom of God.

I might try another paraphrase of Jesus words. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than to talk about money in church.

In our churches, we so often forget that Jesus talked all the time about the use of money... more than any other subject. If Jesus spent a lot of time talking about the use and abuse of money, it is odd that money has become an off limits topic from the pulpit, except maybe once a year at stewardship time. Talk of money in church becomes a strange cloistered and private conversation often detached from our faith.

As disciples of Jesus, it may be well for us to confess that many of us including this preacher, kind of stink when it comes to talking about our stewardship and the power of giving in our lives. But why must this be so difficult? It might be that our sense of security, especially in the west, is tied up so much in what we have. Thinking about giving it away for many is a terrifying thought. Like the man in the Gospel, so many Christians became completely despondent when Jesus asks us to consider giving what we own to the poor. Our bank accounts contract as the smile on our face begins to tighten.

But why must we be so uptight? When, I think about it, the most joyful and purpose filled times of my life came when I loosened my grip and gave of my resources to others.

When you live with an awareness God's grace-filled economy, as opposed to a worldly economy devoid of spirit, you realize that there already enough money, love and grace to go around. You start to loosen up a bit and your smile becomes more relaxed.

Giving really is a grace-filled matter. We never can give as much as God can give whether we have a meager income or millions of dollars.

Remember, we cannot buy our way into heaven. Instead, our task in life is to participate in the generosity of God by truly giving what we can to enrich the lives of others. Through our giving we enter a world where we meet others who give as well and find joy in it.

Our giving unlocks the doors of our constricted hearts and makes us feel not so frozen and uptight. When I come into this beautifully renovated space it takes my breath away. It's not just the beauty of the space. I also think about the beauty of the people who gave sacrificially to create this holy space where we can open wide our doors to our community.

I think about all the praying and preaching that has gone on here over the centuries. I draw so much energy from watching people here give of their time and money to make this church a beacon of welcome, hope and justice in the world.

Have any of you seen the movie, "Millions"?

I love this movie, which so wonderfully shares a story of the joy of giving. "Millions" tells the story of two brothers who lost their mom. In the wake of their mom's death, their dad said their mom would want them to get on with their lives and do the best they could.

At one point, in the movie there is a marvelous scene where millions of British pounds fall out of the sky and are showered on one of the brothers. The brothers then have a conversation about what to do with the money. One brother wants to spend it all. The other brother wants to give it all away. For one brother it was merely a money fortune. For the other brother the money was from God.

It was for him a visible symbol of God's abundance and grace. Both brothers were bathed in these riches but did very different things with the money. It turns out the money was from a bank robbery and had to be returned. But each family secretly held on to just bit of money in the hopes of buying something for themselves.

Spoiler Alert: Instead, in the end, they pool the money and fulfill the young boy's wish to build fresh water wells in a poor country. The closing scene in that movie is of

the young boy and his family dancing with a whole bunch kids as the water pours out of the spigots of a well located in an African village. If you haven't seen it you must. It is quite a fantastic scene: the joy that comes from giving! Today as we participate in the CROP walk or support the CROP walkers to raise money to alleviate hunger and provide disaster relief around the world, I invite us to see this time as a prayerful moment.

As you walk and give, think about the power of generosity in your life. As you walk and give, I invite you to think about all the people who have found so much joy in their giving. In God's economy there is power that comes from generosity. Giving is an act of prayer. It is a faithful response to God's radical love for us. There is enough. There is always enough if we pay attention all around to God's blessings and, in response, open our hearts and our bank accounts to participate in God's abundance.

Are you looking for a taste of heaven in your life? Then think about that generous brother joining all those smiling and laughing children as they danced in that clean water gushing from those spigots. If you have been blessed unexpectedly in some way, give some of it away.

It feels great to be generous. If you want to find your life and get your groove back, then open your mind and your heart to discover the possibilities all around.

As the generous brother declared: Some times you see things when other people can't see them. Or as it says in one of my most favorite hymn in the Pilgrim Hymnal: "All good gifts around us are sent from Heaven above then thank the Lord, Oh thank the Lord for all his love." This is eternal life right here and right now. Amen.