

Taking Hold of the Life That Is Really Life

a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 10, 2022

based on Luke 10:25-37 and I Timothy 6:17-19.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" asks the man identified only as rich and young. He'd just come skidding in to Jesus and falls to his knees in supplication. He wants something and he thinks Jesus may assure him he can have it forever.

"You know the commandments," Jesus says. "I keep them all," the young man answers. "Well then, you lack one thing only -- sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and come follow me." The young man, Luke reports, went away grieving, for he had many possessions. He had a lot, and he could not imagine his life without it all.

Now, you might conclude at this point that Jesus' requirement is universal and daunting: No wealth allowed! Sell it all. Become poor.

I mean, look, Jesus tells his disciples that it will be very difficult for a wealthy person to get into the kingdom—as difficult as squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle.

But the text won't allow such a pat conclusion. You have to read on.

And look, the disciples are totally perplexed. They have been taught all their lives that riches are a sign of God's blessing. They are a sign you are good. What Jesus is saying seems to be the opposite of everything they had learned as children, so they ask, "Who then can be saved?" When Jesus gives an answer about God's ability, Peter nods and then asks, "Hey, we've left everything behind. Aren't we "in?" Haven't we done what is required?"

Jesus, in effect answers, "Peter, you and the rich young man are both asking the wrong question when you ask, "What must I do?" You can't **do** anything. Trying to keep control of your life by being either super rich or super poor is a fool's errand.

The young man's problem is not his wealth; it is his relationship to his wealth. Ironically, he doesn't really own it. It owns him. He is trapped, enslaved by it all. His life amounts to managing the mess. And in his case, according to Jesus, that is no life at all.

Most any routine can lead to a kind of insulation from life. But nothing can insulate a person as much as worrying daily over a super-abundance of money.

Now, we still talk a lot about the top 1% income bracket, but, you know what? That is quickly becoming old school. Today a lot fewer people than that control the most of the world's wealth. You could put those people in the first row of chairs here.

And the 1%? A recent study says that 1% of the population now owns 82% of the wealth of the planet. 82% !!

While 90% of people lost a ton of money in the last recession, the top 1%, the ridiculously rich among us (who did a lot to make the downturn happen) made a killing as a result. Do they have any incentive to keep it from happening again? Probably not.

Why does Jesus spend so much time talking about money and the super rich? Because he pointed out that, in his day, the system was rigged in favor of the super rich. And guess, what? It still is. Yes, and, as Jesus seems to be saying, it's a pretty sad situation for everybody, them included. Here's why.

"The super-rich make lousy neighbors." That's what the late John Updike said in an essay called, *Slum Lords*. "They buy a house and tear it down and build another, twice as big, and leave. They're never there; they own so many other houses, each demands a visit. Entire neighborhoods called fashionable, bustling with servants and masters, such as Louisburg Square in Boston or Bel Air in L.A., are districts now like Wall Street after dark or Tombstone once the silver boom went bust. The essence of the super-rich is absence. They're always demonstrating they can afford to be somewhere else. Don't let them in. Their money is a kind of poverty."

Jesus said to the young man, "One more thing, sell all you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me." But the man went away grieving, because he just couldn't bring himself to even imagine such a thing.

In our recent class in Asian Religions we learned that 2400 years ago a man now known to us as Siddhartha Gautama (who would later become the Buddha) was, legend says, born into a royal family in India. He was born to a father who raised his son behind high walls, intentionally insulating him against life.

His wish, though entirely irrational, was that his son would never know hunger or want. More, he hoped that by removing him completely from the world, his son would never even see the three things he feared most: sickness, death, and the infirmities of age – So, as a result, Buddha was the first bubble baby.

Siddhartha's father thought his great wealth could provide insulation from age and pain. What couldn't his money buy, after all? But even as a tiny child, Siddhartha, wondered what lay beyond his garden wall. As a young married man, he scaled it. In no time at all he saw what had been kept from him: a woman bent with age, a makeshift hospital, a passing funeral procession carrying a silent body be-decked with flowers and followed by a company of monks.

He felt a natural temptation to flee back to his father's palace. He even imagined that once back in his own bed he might think of it all as a mere dream. But he could not do it.

He wandered about for days as in a gray haze. Finally, when the idea of a return to his palace seemed to him insipid he decided that all he could do to remain sane would be to embrace life on its own terms, not his own. But Siddhartha was still very much his father's son. As such he was still driven by his father's revulsion at human suffering. Siddhartha decided then that he would not rest until he found a way to deny its power.

Jesus of Nazareth was never removed from suffering. It never seemed particularly strange to him. He was a peasant, not born into the ruling class.

He decided that suffering was just one of many states that make up a human life. One should do what one could to alleviate an over-abundance of it, but he saw that at times one could best alleviate its power by embracing it as a brother.

In the one sermon we know he preached he said, "Blessed are those who hunger. . . Blessed are those who thirst. Blessed are the poor, and the meek, the betrayed, and those who grieve."

You know, the word, blessed literally means, "You're on the right road." You're on the right road when you mourn because it's living proof, right there in your tears, that you once knew the delicious sense of loving another of God's creatures. Grief, though painful, can elevate the human spirit.

Elie Wiesel says as much in his wonderful discussion of the story of Adam, Eve, and the temptation. At the end of the story, Adam is told by God that his punishment would be that farming would now be hard, toilsome. Eve is told that giving birth would be painful. The snake is told that it would have to crawl on its belly and eat dust all its life. In Wiesel's story, two rabbis discuss this last part.

One rabbi says, "What kind of punishment is that, that the snake gets to eat dust. It will always be full, never be hungry. There will always be dust."

Another rabbi said: "That will be his punishment. Never to be hungry. "

"How is that a punishment?" asks the first.

"There is something in hunger which may elevate the human spirit. A person who never endures a human need, never thirsts, never knows what it means to be unhappy, or alone, or sorrowful, that person cannot live a good life, that person cannot be a full human being."

There is an old saying: "God has given to some the wine. To others the thirst. We would all like to have the wine, but we all need the thirst." Can you get your mind around that one?

I have a poet friend named Ginger Andrews. What makes her interesting is her day job. She cleans houses. She is beautiful, and because of her day job, she has a handshake equal to that of a pipe fitter. She's so surprising. She was a favorite of Garrison Keillor who used to read her poems on his *Writer's Almanac*.

She lives on a street called, Broadway in Coos Bay. Here's a poem of hers written 20 years ago. It's called,

Necessity

You need to live
near the edge of the world
on Broadway Street in my small port town.

You need sweet neighbors
who grow pale pink fuchsias under Plexiglas,
and bright red and yellow dahlias right up through gravel.

You need four sisters
who are as kind hearted as mine,
and think every poem you write is perfect.

You need an alcoholic brother
who's seen the inside of hard time,
whose blue eyes look just like yours.

You need a mother who died young,
a mother who cooked the best plain brown beans in the whole world,
a mother who taught you to share, made you feel rich
though you were poor.

You need a mother
who showed you where wild tiger lilies grow,
a mother who dressed you and your sisters
as pretty as she could for Jesus.
You need a foulmouthed father
who makes you laugh.

You need my dunes, my trees, my ocean,
my fog and routine rain.

You need my modest, middleclass income home.
You need my trusty, rusting 84 Ford
whose odometer reads one hundred
and twenty six thousand miles.

You need my \$7.50 an hour house cleaning jobs,
Tuesdays through Fridays.
You need to pull weeds and trim your laurel hedge.

You need to live on the edge of the world
and, oh, how you need Jesus. (AN HONEST ANSWER, Story Line Press 1998)

There was an article in TIME magazine that asked, "Does God Want You To Be Rich?"
It was written because many churches in this country say, "Yes," to that question and
promise their faithful just that – prosperity. But the debate seems silly to me.

If I were asked, "Does God want you to be rich," I'd say, "Maybe yes, maybe no." If you
are the compulsive single minded type A, type, and you can't see anything but a goal
you set for yourself, and that goal is to make a lot of money, God's will might be for you
to make it, knowing that it's only by having it that you will find out that making money
for it's own sake and nothing else is as hollow and pointless as running a marathon on a
treadmill.

Bill Gates made billions and then he met Melinda who said, "So what?" "Show me
something *besides* the money. . . ." Tell me what you want to do with it. And he didn't
know. Together they decided that the best thing they could do was spend it on the
world's children. Pretty impressive.

Writing instructions to his young disciple, Timothy, the apostle Paul addresses the
matter of an abundance of money directly: "As for those who in the present age are
rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of
riches, but rather on God. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and
ready to share, *so that* they may take hold of the life that is really life" (I is 6:17-19).

Paul seems to just be moralizing here to begin with – you know -- "do good, be rich in
good works, share your stuff, blah, blah, blah" –
Yes, but then he tells them why: "so that they may take hold of the life that is really is
life," and not settle for something glittering and cheap and empty. That's the kicker.

So what is genuine? What really endures? I think the question is worth asking. It may
make us uncomfortable, but that may just be the spur we need. So, on this summer

morning let me close with a poem of Mary Oliver's that asks this question in a way that may just open your heart. It's called . . .

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Amen