

On his death bed, a miser demanded he be buried with all his money leaving behind nothing for his wife and children. After his death some friends approached his widow to offer her jobs and gifts but discovered she had bought a new home, car, and fancy new wardrobe. The friends asked how she could afford all of this with the entire estate being buried with her deceased husband? The widow replied, "Well I deposited the funds from the estate into my account and buried my dear husband with a check for the total..."

Our gospel today speaks very directly about a rich man and paints him in the same light as our joke treats the dead miser. And the exchange he has with Jesus is quite interesting and even meant to be funny in its own way. Starting with addressing Jesus as good teacher; we see the man uses flattery to introduce himself to Jesus but Jesus rejects it immediately. He won't play his game because Jesus doesn't play the world's game; he is always in the Kingdom of God. Then he answers him by citing some of the Commandments but slips in one more not in the original.

Which commandment is 'do not defraud'? If you look on page 317 or 350 of the Book of Common Prayer you will see the Ten Commandments also known as the Decalogue. There is simply no commandment for defrauding. So why does Jesus say it? Notice the passage mentions Jesus looking at people three times. It deliberately mentions Jesus' gaze. There can be no doubt from the exchange that Jesus susses out the rich man and assess his stature in society. There are other places in Hebrew scripture that do command people not to defraud, like in Deuteronomy, so that in this exchange, Jesus is clearly up to something from the start. Notice also that after Jesus says there is no one good but God alone the man says he has kept the entire law since his birth, even after Jesus has accused him of being a thief in a less than subtle way. I guess he's not such a good teacher after all...

It's quite an exchange with more than a wink wink and a nudge nudge, and I would argue the climactic point is when it says that Jesus looked at him and loved him; the only place in Mark where it says Jesus loves anyone. Two things are happening here. One is the juxtaposition of Jesus reciting the decalogue, which, to him, is the bare minimum, given to people with hardness of heart as we read last week, earlier in Mark, versus Jesus's living the great commandment: loving God and one's neighbor. He embodies the great commandment and stands in stark contrast to the rich man who is so boastful he thinks he has kept all the commandments. The second thing is that Jesus is actually loving a sinner. And in that way he is embodying the love of God as the Messiah. Therefore, in that moment, as it says further on, the man has the opportunity to experience eternal life – to be in the Kingdom of God. Sadly he chooses the temporal wealth of this world instead of the infinite riches God has to offer. He is possessed by his possessions rather than filled with the grace of God. But the disciples have chosen to receive this grace instead, and so can we. Or will we remain possessed as the rich man?

Why use the word possessed? Of course there is the pun on the word possessions but there is also the literal use of the term in Mark's gospel referring to people who are possessed by demons. Jesus treats this man like he does those who are possessed by demons when he says to him 'get up' as we hear him say after he heals the demon-possessed and then sends them on their way. So Mark's gospel, here and throughout, has something to say about wealth: it possesses us like

a demon. We can easily become possessed by our possessions. Certainly this is something we struggle with in our society every day. It is such a difficult aspect of human nature that it would take a miracle for so many of us to overcome it. It could probably only be healed by God's grace.

Ang grace is really what all of our passages are about today. It is mentioned by name in the psalm and all the passages we read and is addressed here in the gospel. What is grace? In Christianity it is quite a loaded term but for today we might say it is God's divine giving to us which sustains us and which can be fully experienced if we open ourselves to receive this gift. The rich man cannot. He is stuck in a society which believes he is rich because he is righteous in the eyes of God. But this is Jesus' lesson to the disciples who also believe that those who are wealthy have their riches as a sign of God's grace, that by giving up everything, they have gained even more, as the rich man did not. What does it mean if they have left everything behind they have gained all mothers and brothers, sisters, and houses? It's a radical way of seeing the world as God has created it: with no lines and no laws, and no money. All people are God's people, all property is God's property, and gold is just a shiny rock; everything belongs to God and therefore we are only receiving it as a gift. This is the definition of grace.

The problem we have is that we think we deserve things: our job, our stature, our money. We think this world is a meritocracy when in reality it is a gift beyond our control. In The Tyranny of Merit, by Michael J. Sandel, he writes: *A perfect sense of meritocracy banishes all sense of gift or grace. It diminishes our capacity for seeing ourselves as sharing a common fate... This is what makes merit a kind of tyranny or unjust rule.* Then points out in a segment entitled "Market Value Versus Moral Value": *Having talents that enable me to cater to market demand is no more my own doing than inheriting valuable property.* Which is an acknowledgement of what people of faith would call grace. Jesus knows this in today's gospel. Christians, therefore also know this.

As Episcopalians, our prayer life acknowledges all things to be a gracious gift from God including our finances, helping us to have a posture of gratitude when we consider all that we have. We sing: *praise God from Whom all blessings flow, and say: all things come of Thee, o Lord and of Thine own have we given Thee.* There is a payer for the right use of God's gifts on page 387, we pray on 550 for *A blessing upon all human labor, and for the right use of the riches of your creation that the world may be freed from poverty, famine, and disaster.* And if you listen carefully to each Eucharistic prayer, which means thanksgiving in Greek, you will hear woven throughout, the acknowledgement of God's grace in all things.

Our prayer life and theology acknowledge that the proper posture of all humankind, and certainly all Christians is humility in the presence of God's grace, leading us to hearts full of gratitude. We are grateful for God's grace and therefore live in gratitude, generously giving to others what God has graciously given us. In this is true freedom from our fears of not having enough, from a society which demands too much, and a life never fully lived. Gratitude for God's grace is a radical way of seeing the world that changes not only one's own life but the life of the world. This is limitless life. This is the Kingdom of God, right here and right now, and it is a gift for you and for the world.