**October 11, 2015 – 20th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us! Amen!

Holy smoke, I thought last week’s text was hard. But give me divorce over money anytime! In today’s Gospel we heard the story of the rich young man who earnestly comes to Jesus for pastoral help. We don’t know much about this young man at first. We know he’s sincere and not trying to trap or test Jesus because of the way he runs up to Jesus and falls on his knees before him. The Greek word here is *gonupeteo*, which means specifically to fall on your knees in supplication, rather than just an ill-timed trip.

In some ways, his demeanor makes this story a little more complex than the later versions of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew the young man merely approaches Jesus without kneeling, and in Luke, to make it even less ambiguous, the young man is a ruler of some kind. It’s much easier to hold someone at a distance, or maybe even despise him, if he’s not sincere and on his knees.

Before answering Jesus says something surprising and a bit of a non-sequitor, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” But before we can think much about what he might have meant by that, Jesus recites the ten commandments. Actually, he only recites the last six of them, known as the second table of commandments, which all have to do with how humans should treat each other.

He doesn’t say a word about the first four commandments, all of which have to do with humanity’s interaction with God. Maybe this is because the young man actually IS interacting with God right at that moment, and that might also be why Jesus said the part about only God being good. New Testament scholars are no doubt debating this as we speak, but we’ll move on.

The young man assures Jesus that he has followed those commandments all his life. What happens next only happens in Mark’s version, and further reinforces the compassion we feel for this young man. The text says, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”

Jesus looks at him and loves him. And out of that love comes his next statement. He knew this young man, and he knew that he had sincerely kept those commandments to the best of his ability, so it’s time to go on to the next step. “There’s only one thing you need to do – sell all you have, and give to the poor. Your treasure will be in heaven. And come and follow me.”

And the young man couldn’t do it. He couldn’t do it and it broke his heart. He walks away not just sad, but grieving.

I don’t blame him. I’m not sure I could do that either. Sell everything and give to the poor? It sounds idyllic, but impossible.

So let’s pull some of this passage apart and see what we can make of it. Let’s go right back to the beginning. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” asked the young man. Well, the truth of the matter is that there is NOTHING we can do to inherit eternal life. It has already been granted to us by God’s grace and Jesus’ sacrifice and no amount of “goodness” on our part can make that happen. And obviously Jesus knows this, being the source of that grace himself and, as the prayer book puts it, the author of our salvation.

So why does he bring up the ten commandments at all, and specifically those commandments pertaining to how we treat each other. Well, those six commandments are the framework for our behavior to each other. They are the baseline from which all other behavior springs. Killing, lying, stealing, defrauding, having affairs, or disrespecting our elders seem like pretty basic behaviors to avoid in general.

But it doesn’t stop there, Jesus says. Look at all your stuff. Having a lot while you know others around you are hungry or homeless isn’t exactly stealing, but neither is it necessarily treating others as you would want to be treated. And how was that stuff accumulated? By lying or cheating just a little bit? Maybe not, but how about not giving as much as we could because you need to save for a rainy day? Or a new house. Or your children’s college fund. Or maybe it’s because THOSE poor people aren’t the deserving poor.

As Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Workers Movement, said, “The Gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.”

Jesus does tell the young man to sell all of his stuff, but, in spite of what our NRSV translation says, he doesn’t tell him to give away ALL the money and become destitute himself. All he says is to give to the poor. Maybe he means for the young man to follow his own conscience as to how much. Or maybe the giving isn’t as important as the divesting. Maybe those other four commandments come into play here, or at least the first two. As a reminder, they are:

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me.” And, “You shall not make for yourself any idol.”

How many of us can honestly say that we put God first always? I know I can’t. I try, but I’m just as human as the next person, and the next, and the next. We’re all flawed, just like that young man was.

The last thing Jesus says to the young man is, once again, subject to interpretation – this time because Biblical Greek has no punctuation and no initial capitals. The NRSV says, “Then come, follow me.” But the Greek text has no indication of sequence. It just says, “And come, follow me.”

It’s a new thought, separate from selling stuff and giving to the poor. For that matter, the selling and the giving could be two separate thoughts, too. How’s this for a way of looking at it.

*Go and sell everything that keeps you from giving God your full attention.*

*Give to the poor, who need it more than you do, and you will find your treasure in heaven.*

*No matter what you do, come and follow me.*

But the sad young man gets stopped at the first sentence and never even hears the other two. How many times has THAT happened to some of us? A preacher is starting off a rip roaring sermon that has us on the edge of our seats. Then he mentions the dread words stewardship, pledging, and the worst of all, tithing, and it doesn’t matter what he says next because he’s lost us. Done. Finito. Moving on….

What Jesus is telling us here is to love God and to love our neighbors. These are the two Great Commandments that we hear about later in Mark, in Chapter 12. And he’s telling us to follow him – follow him not because he’s a good teacher, but because he’s our Lord and God.

I imagine that, in the same way he looked at the young man and loved him, Jesus looks at us and loves us. In spite of our weakness, our pettiness, our selfishness, our humanity. Because the bottom line is that God loves us. There’s nothing we can do to deserve it or earn it, we just have to accept it and, in turn, try to show that same love to everyone around us, loveable or not.

Love God, love your neighbors, follow Jesus. It’s that simple. AND that difficult. So to that end, we pray again that God’s grace may always precede and follow us, no matter where we go or what we do! We ask this in the holy name of our savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.