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Would You Give It All Up?

A sermon given by
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On Sunday, October 11, 2009

The message today is about the rich young ruler; but it's really about us. It's about the paths that we choose, the roads that we take. It's about our conscience. It's about the compromises we've made, the regrets that we have and the idealism to which we cling.

You may recall a popular TV series called *West Wing*, which was a fictional account of the White House with vague allusions to reality. In this series Martin Sheen plays the role of the President, Jeb Bartlett, and Alison Janey plays the role of press secretary. We see in this series the ambivalence with which the President struggles, on the one hand, between his call to public service and his deep convictions, and on the other, the reality of manipulating the levers of power in a complex, contentious world.

There's an episode in which the fictional President, Jeb Bartlett, is running for reelection. He's in a heated campaign. It's very close, and his poll numbers are slipping. What's happened is that his handlers, his managers, have over-handled him to the point that the President is only sticking with his talking points and only saying what's going to bring a bump and a boost in the poll numbers.

The polls keep sliding and sliding and the head staff has an emergency meeting trying to decide what to do. How do we turn this campaign around? Then at one point his campaign manager, Leroy, writes some cryptic words on a napkin. The words are these, "Let Bartlett be Bartlett." Let the President be the President. To heck with the polls and the focus groups and the spin doctors. BE WHO YOU ARE.

For 2000 years we have been trying to find a way to make the gospel lessons fit comfortably in our lives. We have spun it and framed it and interpreted it. We've smoothed over its rough edges, we've sweetened the medicine to make it more palatable for sensitive stomachs. Take Jesus' words that you've all heard so many times, the words that he says to the disciples after the rich young ruler goes away dejected, saying, "It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

Have you ever heard this text preached, for the sake of cushioning the blow, by saying that what's really meant here by "the eye of a needle" is not the needle that you find in your sewing kit, but it's really the Eye of the Needle which is a narrow opening in the city wall. So, you see, it's easy to see that if you had a really thin camel and he wasn't carrying lots of stuff, he could push and shove his way through that hole. Why, if this is the case, maybe with a little extra push and shove we can all push our way through the pearly gates.

Indeed, I wonder, how is the church any different from those political handlers, fictional or otherwise, who've domesticated the message of the gospel, tamed it down for fickle audiences who might just as easily walk across the street and go to the Methodists, or fickle audiences who might switch their allegiances in the voting booth to that other party.

Hear the Gospel this morning, and let the Gospel be the Gospel. Let Jesus be Jesus. As Annie Dillard used to say, "I want the Gospel in its stony jars or I won't have it at all."

Hear the story for the first time, as it were, and if the guilt bubbles up inside you, put it aside. And if you find yourself getting defensive and angry, put it in a parking lot. Just hear and listen not only to what is said, but how it is said—its tone.

This is what we know of the story. It's a rich young man. A ruler. How do we know this? Because in Matthew's version of the text of the story, Matthew tells us he's young. And in Luke's version he tells us that he's a ruler. So we put it all together: he's a rich young ruler. He's a good person. Did he not follow and obey all the commandments? Is he not one who puts service above self? I think he's probably the first Rotarian. He's an upstanding member of the community. Yes, he's got seats on the 50-yard line, but you know you can just as easily find him down at LINK serving up casseroles. He's a good person, a good guy.

He comes to Jesus with a question burning in his heart and wrestling with his conscience. He's got everything going for him, but he knows that something is missing and he says, "Hey, teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

That's a big question. Now, notice the tone of Jesus' response. He in no way insults or demeans or dismisses him. He doesn't say "yeah, whatever." He recognizes the genuineness of this young man's request. And he says, "You know the commandments: honor your father and mother; do not steal; do not commit adultery...." And the young man says, "Yes, teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Then Jesus looks at him and it says in the text, "He loved him."

Think about that. He loved him. Is it not the case that the hardest conversations in our lives are the conversations that take place in an atmosphere of love? Conversations that take place where the engagement is real, where the other is honored and not dismissed. It is the love part. Imagine Jesus looking at any one of us right now with the eyes of love. How could we not say, "Yes, Lord, I will follow you." How could we say no to that face?

The rich young ruler wants to say yes. There must be something he can do. "Jesus, can I just write you out a check?" But no is what he will say. In fact, he cannot even coax the words out of his mouth, he is so shocked and grieved by what Jesus tells him. We learn in the text that he simply turns and walks away.

conversation about what path you will choose in your life, what road you will follow. It's not a conversation about whether or not you are a good person or a bad person. We know he is a good man. But here's where the Gospel gets tough. It says that being good is not good

Here is what the conversation is and what it is not. It is a enough. To the rich young man's question Jesus gives a big answer. Fred Craddock says "small answers to big questions are insulting."

"You lack one thing. Go sell all you have, give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me." The gauntlet is thrown down, the line drawn in the sand. In a culture where, above all, we prize the balance between work and family, between helping others and our own advancement, where we balance one foot in God's realm and one foot in the world, this must come as a blow: Give it all up.

Before we dismiss this text, know that this path has been tried and lived—this radical way of life, this total submission to the Gospel—and whether we say yes or no to this path, know that we walk in the shadow of the people who have lived it. There are those like St. Francis of Assisi who was raised a wealthy young man but found his life deeply unsatisfying. Perhaps some of you have seen the movie, *Brother Sun and Sister Moon*, directed by Zeffirelly. We see in the movie that St. Francis stands before the whole town, the local Bishop and his parents; he takes off his clothes, he gives it all up and he walks out in the forest to live among the poor. Francis of Assisi walked the path.

Ghandhi died owning only a pair of glasses. He walked the path.

Dorothy Day gave her life to the Catholic Worker movement, working with poor people in the streets of New York City. Dorothy Day walked the path.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in 1937, wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship* that boils down to this one question: How much of one's everyday comfort is one willing to surrender in pursuit of Jesus' calling? Bonhoeffer lived that question with his life. In 1939 he was teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He was comfortable in the United States, and all his friends told him, "Don't go back to Germany." But in 1939 that's exactly what he did. He wrote, "I've come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share in the trials of this time with my people." We know that in 1943 he was arrested by the Nazis and in 1945 in April he was executed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer walked the path.

We live in the shadow of these giants who walked this radical path. Even if we do not choose the same, can we or do we feel guilty about the choices that we make? Is being a good person good enough? Can we accept ourselves as we are or is full submission the only path? Are there different paths? That's the question that I put before you.

I was fortunate enough in 1992 to attend a conference with two of the great religious leaders of the late twentieth century. One was Henri Nouwen, who taught at Yale and Harvard but finally found his true home in working with a community of disabled people, cognitively impaired. The other at the conference was William Sloane Coffin, tireless worker for social justice, hated by many, stirring the social conscience of the country. These two men were at the conference together. I'll never forget when Henri Nouwen said he realized that "I am no Bill Coffin."

I was reminded that we all have different paths, we all have different gifts. Not all of us are called to be Bonhoeffers or Dorothy Days. And yet, and yet, we cannot rest with an easy conscience. And here's why: the day that we domesticate this gospel message and try to make it palatable is the day that we kiss the vitality of this church goodbye.

A group of young people in our church met in "Theology on Tap" on Thursday and they discussed this very passage that we're looking at right now. Every one of them had heard about the loopholes meant to get around the hard text, to salve the uneasy conscience of affluent middle America, and not a one of them was buying it or believed it to be the true intention of Jesus' words. They all believed in the radical call of the Gospel.

So I say to you, we need to think about what message we are conveying to our young people in those critical years between 18 and 25 years old. Like the young ruler in this lesson, they too are asking what matters in life. Is there a God? What does it all mean? Consider, too, how the world of parents, teachers, professors, loved ones—unwittingly perhaps—tends to snuff out the flame of passion, stifle the idealism with their message of realism. Think about health insurance, and what about your financial sustainability? All this works against this radical call. So let us be the one place that dares to lay before our young people the radical call of the Gospel.

What does it mean for all of us? Even if we know what Jesus calls us to do, are we unwilling to do it? Are we like a drowning man in a shipwreck who holds on to his gold rather than let it go in order to grasp a life preserver? If it is so hard to enter the Kingdom of God, then what can and who can be saved? That's what the disciples asked. And here comes the bad news. Jesus looks at the disciples and said, "For mortals it is impossible." But wait; all is not lost. There is good news. Jesus adds, "but not for God; for God all things are possible."

How might we think about that? Might we realize that none of us are smart enough. None of us are wise enough. None of us, at the end of the day, really can say what is missing in our lives. None of us can say for sure exactly what it is we are called to do and be in our lives. Who of us beyond a reasonable doubt could say that I know for sure that I have chosen the right path for my life?

That is why I take comfort in the words of St. Paul in First Corinthians: "We see through a glass darkly, but then we shall see face to face." We cannot see now but we can trust and believe that by God's grace the answers will be revealed to us. It will be, at some point, made clear. We live in the present but we look to the future with hope. In the meantime we live trusting in the grace of God.

No more eloquent expression of the limits of our own reach and the necessity of God's grace were penned than these by Reinhold Niebuhr:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;

Therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;

Therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;

Therefore we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint;

Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.

By grace, we can walk in the shadow of the radical path. We can let the Gospel be the Gospel.