

Throw away your Idols

Malady: We as Christians trust in other things before God.

Means: God has given us Christ; throw away your idols.

Function: That the hearers may put their trust in God over human riches and power.

Focus: All things are possible through God.

Our text today is from our Gospel reading:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Thus ends our text. Amen

I will tell you the truth; I agonized over this text. This was one of the more difficult readings I have preached on in a while. It left me with several questions. The question that was the most difficult for me was this. Most of the disciples and onlookers think this young rich man is a pretty good guy; why then does Jesus turn him away? Jesus, as the story states looks this man over. In my translation of the Greek I preferred something like this. "And after Jesus had looked at him he continued to love him." It is a subtle nuance but I imagine the scene taking place like this with the Greek word taking great importance. Jesus is giving this young rich man a once over and it seems that even Jesus loves him or at least sees a slight sincerity in him. Why then would Jesus say the one thing that would send him away? Maybe this man is responsible for the care of his parents? Maybe this man is responsible for a younger sister? Maybe this man's money puts him in position to change things at the temple, which is why he kept his riches in the first place?

Instead of being sensitive to this mans position as we all expect, Jesus instead asks the unthinkable; to caste away his only supports and follow a carpenter. What's even more, during this period, if you followed a certain kind of Rabbi you were only required to sell one fifth of all you owned and give it to the poor but to give away all you owned? That

seems far too much. How will I take care of myself? What about Peter and other disciples who kept their homes or other possessions? Was it right for them to keep those things? What exactly is the problem with this rich young man?

To understand this question we must first step back a bit in the story and think about specifically what questions Jesus asks this rich young man. What I find interesting is that Jesus intentionally asks this man about commandments that were readily identifiable and easier not to transgress. He asks if the man has kept the last six commandments to which the man can easily or at least he thinks he can easily say yes. Then Jesus pulls his trap. He has looked at this man. He has argued with him as to the meaning of good. And finally he asks the man to give away all that he has. All that he has ever accumulated. His life's work so to speak. Can he bear to give it? Unfortunately no! The rich young man walks away disheartened. Why? Why does he walk away?

This rich young man starts his little adventure with Christ by stating that Christ is a good teacher. Christ replies, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone?" What does this mean? Christ is really saying, "Why do you call me good? Isn't God good? So, if I am good then I must be God, Right?" Christ doesn't spell it out for the man. The reason is unclear, but what is clear is that the rich man's answer to Christ's second question would be influenced by his answer to the first.

Christ is God and had this man truly known or believed that he was, his answer to giving away all he had then becomes much easier. It is a tragic misunderstanding of who Jesus is and thus a misunderstanding of the question Jesus was asking. As Christ says further on in the pericope, "For all things are possible with God." This man need not fear. God is asking and God will supply. This man was afraid to trust in what he thought was only a man. A good man but still just a man. Instead he had made his own God out of his money because he trusted in it more than in Yahweh.

Idolatry is difficult to identify especially when it is within one's own heart. Perhaps an illustration will help:

In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen retells a tale from ancient India: Four royal brothers decided each to master a special ability. Time went by, and the brothers met to reveal what they had learned. "I have mastered a science," said the first, "by which I can take but a bone of some creature and create the flesh that goes with it." "I," said the second, "know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones." The third said, "I am able to create its limbs if I have flesh, the skin, and the hair." "And I," concluded the fourth, "know how to give life to that creature if

its form is complete." Thereupon the brothers went into the jungle to find a bone so they could demonstrate their specialties. As fate would have it, the bone they found was a lion's. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. Shaking its mane, the ferocious beast arose and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle.

We too have the capacity to create what can devour us. The things or pursuits in our life can easily mire us in this world without enough concentration on the next. Are we worried about how the next month's bills will be paid? Are we worried that we might toil on the earth forever with no mention of our names except on our tombstone? Are we tired of other people having too much control over our lives? What is it? What is keeping you from concentrating on the things of above?

For me it is comfort. I sometimes forget that I am living in England. I can stay safely nestled in Westfield House among fellow Americans and never venture out into that unknown that is Cambridge. I am so worried about being uncomfortable that I let it take precedence over God. It gets in the way of true worship and reliance.

St Augustine said, "Idolatry is worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that ought to be worshiped." And in our story for today, the man is doing both. He is putting his treasure before Yahweh and trying to use Jesus to attain his salvation. It is pretty clear.

My friends, Jesus tells us that it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Not highly unlikely, but like a camel passing through the eye of a needle, impossible. How does he mean this however? He means that a Rich man cannot by means of his riches enter the kingdom of God.

This startles the Disciples because in their minds the rich are the few who are assured a place in heaven. They must be God's favored because they are richly blessed here. **Jesus turns this all on its head and rather suggests that it is something entirely out of their control.** They are afraid. **We are afraid.** What is it that we/they can cling to? We have been trying in so many ways to take care of ourselves. To build ourselves up. To get ourselves to heaven and now Jesus has succinctly torn them all down. We are left as sinners with nowhere else to turn and we amazed and murmuring just like the disciples ask, **"Then who can be saved?"** I say to you as Jesus said to them, **"With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."**

What a relief! It is not about what we have done but it is about what is capable for God. God has sent his son to live a life in devotion to the father. Jesus lived in complete devotion to the father for us. In our baptism we claim the riches that Jesus has won for us. As it says in Ephesians 3:16, "According to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in his inner being." We were given riches of spiritual help. God will send his spirit into our hearts to help us to see our idols and topple them.

We were given riches of mercy and grace. God loved us when we were dead in sin and didn't give us what we deserved. And now God give us in grace all those things that we do not deserve. God's gifts to us are immeasurable and we can see them promised to us in the ending of our pericope today. Christ answers the Peters statement with one of his own. He says,

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

In other words, those who follow me will receive a hundred times what they have given up plus eternal life plus persecution. You and I need not fear. Our riches are here in scripture, are in the sacraments and in eternity where we will be united with Christ on the last day. He will then give riches beyond comparison. We need not worry about what tomorrow will bring for we are Christ's and he has promised to provide for us. More importantly is the fact that when we place our treasures in heaven we own our treasures here and stop them from letting them have power over us.

The rich young man in our story erred when he could not see that Christ was God and as such was capable of anything. He was worthy of complete trust. Thank God for our Baptisms. They give us faith and show us whom to trust. Thank God for the word, which shows us how, God has delivered on every one of his promises. Throw away your idols! There is something better to trust. Praise be to God!

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**