Sunday, November 18, 1973
WHAT ABOUT YOU?
Mark 10:17-22

Not all of the people who sought out Jesus, who talked with him, who admired him, who were helped by him and who were otherwise impressed by him, became his followers or took his advice. Some when they received his invitation to follow him, said, “No!”

Such was the case with the rich young ruler in the gospel story from Mark which we just read. In understanding this incident, we don’t want to place too much emphasis on the fact that it was a rich young ruler who rejected the call of Jesus. For then we might excuse ourselves by saying--"Well, we’ re not rich, or we’re not that young, or we’re not a ruler.”

Actually, in our time a person like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus would be like many of us. He had arrived at a position of some standing in the community, he had acquired some property, a nice home which he was paying for, one or maybe two cars and a little bit of security.

But in spite of all of this, there was something lacking in his life now. It may have always been lacking but he was first no. really becoming aware of the lack. Even though he had a nice job, a steady income, a good family, was living in a pleasant community, he began to be aware of the fact that he was not going to live forever in this world, that he would one day die and more than that, and perhaps because of that, he sensed deep down a certain emptiness in his life.

What was life all about? What was he really living and working for? These are questions which come to all of us as we grow older each day and year. Yet most of us find it hard to accept the reality of our own deaths. Other people die. We know that, but the fact that one day our life here will be over is hard to grasp.

When we face the fact of our own death, this then puts other things in our life in a new perspective, and we begin to realize that a sense of meaning and worth in our living has really nothing to do with the how of our living, with the things with which we surround ourselves.

We long for the sense of being involved or connected to some larger eternal purpose — being connected to something which transcends our own life and worries.

Sometimes events put us in situations which we would not have chosen but which, in spite of the adversity and hardship, add meaning to our living. Recalling the days of the Berlin airlift in 1948-49, a professional woman declared, “That was the best time of my life!” Living in an apartment with no heat during the heart of a bitter cold winter, groping her way through unlighted streets at night, walking through the darkness with no public transportation available, her spirits were nevertheless high.

“Hearing the constant, comforting drone of the great American planes flying in supplies overhead,” she said, “We West Berliners knew that we had to demonstrate to Russia that our spirit could never be defeated.” This, she said, was a great period in her life for here was a time when she felt intimately involved in a meaningful task with others. She felt a part of something larger than herself.

Sometimes we choose activities or join forces with others in an attempt to find greater meaning in our lives. That's why people through the years join all kinds of organizations and often work hard in them. It's an attempt to be connected in a significant way with others in achieving some worthy goal or purpose. People become active in political parties and campaigns for similar reasons and in all sorts of other activist movements and community affairs. We all know that there is nothing quite so exciting or exhilarating as being caught up in a cause.

Such things do give our lives an added dimension for a time. However, it's often difficult to sustain that devotion and commitment. We get disappointed or disgruntled, or just plain tired. Or when a certain goal is accomplished then the cause is ended and there's a letdown.

We find that such activities add meaning to our lives for a time, but when they cease, then an emptiness returns to our lives. Then our search has to begin again.

The rich young ruler who came to Jesus was on that kind of search. He was seeking some larger meaning and direction in his living.

Now it has been a major insistence of the Christian faith that every person counts, that no person is expendable. For carrying out God's purposes very ordinary people are as important as the extra-ordinary. There is a place in the scheme of things for every single person with his own unique set of aptitudes and abilities and no one else can make the specific contribution that he or she can make.

Thus, the happiest people in the world are those who have found the life task where they feel they are making some contribution to the world and the most unhappy are those who have not even begun to search.

The story of the young man who came to Jesus is especially important for us today because as was the case with this young man, so it often is with us. And it is many times about in the middle of life that persons really begin to reexamine their purpose for living and the meaning of life itself.

It is rather typically characteristic of young maturity, of the man or woman who having established himself vocationally and having achieved some degree of stability in family relationships and having arrived at some position of standing in his community, then begins to wonder what life is all about and if the struggle is worthwhile at all. It is then that we often wonder if we should change jobs, and it is then that often the crises appear in marriages as a kind of general boredom sets in and some mistakenly think that a new lover might brighten things up a bit, add some new excitement and meaning. People in middle life, on a sort of plateau, often express the feeling by saying, "I am stuck," or "I feel trapped."

You see, as was true of the young man who came to Jesus, the usual goals in our culture when they are attained, turn out to be notably inadequate for making life worth living. This does not mean that they are not important for us and the community at large, but we all seek at the same time a larger meaning and purpose, something eternal.

It is to the credit of the young man who came to Jesus that he recognized that something was lacking in his life. That's why he came to Jesus. He came running and knelt before him. He thought, "Perhaps here is one man who can help me get unstuck, who can help me find that deeper meaning in life that I so desperately want." That took great courage on his part. We all know how difficult it is to say to any person at any time, "I have gone as far as I can alone; I

need your help.” Every one of us tries to present himself to others in the best possible light. We don’t like to admit to any emptiness in our life and we don’t like to admit that we need help from anyone.

Yet this young man asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He was looking for something “more” in life than he had. He admitted to an emptiness and seemed willing to take some further action. We might paraphrase his question in these words — "What must I do to make some sense out of my life, to know that I am doing something worthwhile and eternal?”

First, Jesus asked if he was observing the most elementary rules of life, the foundation. So, Jesus said, “You know the commandments: Do not Kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.”

These are the “givens“ of life, the beginning point. And to the young man’s credit he could answer that he had been a decent and upright citizen, but that he was looking for something more in his life.

And so, it is. We can follow the rules, obey the laws, and still have an emptiness in our lives. This is not to say that the basic commandments are not important. They are! They are the beginning point, like following the fundamentals in any sport or art. But then we have to go on from there.

Jesus knew this. The rich young ruler sensed this. What he sought now was that next step.

Also, up to this point in his life the young man had been getting a good start in his career and had probably not taken much time to reflect on the meaning of what he was doing.

In our culture, in particular, many face a similar situation. They work hard, are aggressive, action oriented, get a good start in their vocation, establish a family, acquire possessions and in so doing are so busy that they may neglect the more philosophical, meaning-oriented, side of their lives.

Then in the prime of life, when the early struggles are over, the search for meaning seeks conscious expression. Sometimes it even becomes destructive, or it leads to a sense of disillusionment and discontent which is so common in middle life.

It also leads sometimes to fanaticism when a person will grab onto almost any philosophy, or movement or fringe group and will quit asking questions, for he feels more secure in his fanaticism. This, of course, can happen to the young, the middle-aged, or the longer living.

But back to the gospel story itself. Mark reports that after the initial conversation, Jesus gave the young man some very explicit instructions. “You lack one thing, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me!”

Go, sell, give, come, follow. In dealing with the lack of purpose in this man’s life, Jesus provided active. help in discovering that purpose. He did two things. First, he tried to help the young man see that life was worth living, that it does have a meaning, and second, he attempted to help the man find the specific personal meaning that beckons. Here is what I called in an earlier sermon — THE POWER OF POSITIVE ACTING. Jesus called the man to specific action, but it was more than simply following a set of rules or ritual. He called the man to action that involved a risk, a complete change of direction.

In this case, Jesus told the man to sell what he had and give away the money to the poor. Jesus could see that in this man's case, what he owned was a major block in his life. It was also a way of saying — "How serious are you in your search for new meaning in life) for eternal life?"

If you are really serious, then this may involve leaving some things behind and giving some things away — it involves a risk, a leap of faith. How willing are you really?

God knows that we many times play games with our questions and commitments. How serious are we really about our commitment to God and the work of the church? Serious enough to give up some things for it? This story is saying--"What about you?" What about me? Are we willing to put aside, give away some of those things that hold us back?

Jesus could see that this young man needed to be carried outside of himself and his wealth by a great devotion.

But the story does not have a happy ending. Like many of us, the young man did not accept the invitation of Jesus. Mark reports that when he heard Jesus' call to action, he turned away sorrowfully and left for he had great pos- sessions.

Think of what the man lost. He missed a great friendship, a close and personal friendship with Jesus himself. He chose his wealth over that. He missed a great chance for growing and changing. Rather he chose to remain where he was. He missed a great adventure. When he saw that little group of disciples disappear down the road, he did not know that they were walking directly into the center of the greatest movement in history.

There's even a wider application to the end of the story. There are many things in life to which we come running eagerly in expectation and from which we go away slowly and sorrowfully. We're afraid to give of ourselves. The running approach and the slow and sorrowful retreat is found in many areas of our living.

A person, for example, wants to be a writer. He runs up to it, all equipped with pens and paper and great expectations. Then he learns the cost, that it is grueling toil, and he is not willing to pay it, and goes sorrowfully away. We see it in friendship. We see it in marriage. How many come running excitedly only to learn the high cost in self-discipline and self-forgetfulness, then go away sorrowful for they have great possessions in self-love and self-care and cannot give them up.

And of course, as in the case of the Gospel story, we see it in Christian discipleship — the many who come with eagerness, really running in spirit and then they learn the cost. They hear the command and then they turn away because they are not willing to give something up. Like the young man we may be missing the greatest adventure in history.

What about you? What are you looking for in life and after your life is over? What's holding you back from giving yourself completely over to God? Amen.