Sunday, October 15, 2000
GOD AND THE GOOD LIFE
Mark 10:17-27

I wish I knew more about this man who came running to Jesus, knelt before him, and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Here are some of the things I don't know but wish I did. Was he a male in mid-life? What prompted him, at whatever stage in life he was, to seek out Jesus and ask that question? He is described as a man who had many possessions, so we assume he was a rich man. How rich was he? Was he in the category of Warren Buffet or Bill Gates? Or was he rich like most of us who have more possessions than we need? Was he single or married? If married, did he have children to support? If he did, what was he teaching them about eternal values in life?

When he asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, what did he have in mind with the term "eternal life?" Was he thinking of life after this life? Or was he using the term "eternal life" to also indicate a more meaningful life here and now, as well as life after this life?

Was he asking, "How can I fill the emptiness in my life? What will give my life purpose? I've got all of this stuff, but there's something missing. I've followed all the rules, but surely there's more to life than following the rules. I'm looking for something eternal."

Here are some of the things we do know about this man from Mark's brief description. He was a religious person. He knew the commandments because when Jesus quoted them, he said that he had obeyed all of them since he was a young man, but that still didn't give him the satisfaction he was seeking.

We also know that when Jesus told him, "You lack one thing; (He lacked one thing? Didn't Mark say he had many possessions? He didn't think he lacked anything.) go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me." He was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

The writer of Mark's gospel also adds this revealing comment: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." I think he loved this man because at least he was asking the right question, even if he didn't like the answer.

I have been in the ministry now for more than 43 years. Many people have come to me at one time or another, as I'm sure they have to other ministers, and said something like this: "I am in desperate trouble and I need the help of God." The troubles and questions have been of every kind. Here's someone who has lost her job, or another person has a marriage problem, or parents have come to talk about a child gone wrong. I could give you a long list of specific problems. These people have been "weary and heavy laden," and I'm pleased they have come to the church for help.

However, never in these more than 43 years has someone come to me and said, "My life has been blessed. I have more possessions than I need. I am in good health and have a wonderful marriage. My children are grown and responsible. I have much more than I deserve. I need the help of God to deal with my good fortune. I'm still searching for what's eternal in life, here and now, and after this life."

You could be thinking, “The reason that no one of that description has ever come to ask for the help of God is because there are no people in our world who have that kind of life.” And I would answer, “To be sure, there are few people, if any, for whom life is devoid of any kind of trouble or problems. Yet there are many individuals who have had no overwhelming defeat in their lives, no bitter disappointments, and for whom life has been, overall, quite smooth. There are many people, especially in this country, in this congregation, and who are listening on the radio and on television who, overall, would admit that life has been more than fair to them. They have gotten more good things than they have deserved.”

Why is it then that such individuals have not done what this man who came running to Jesus did, and said, “I need the help of God to deal with my good fortune. What must I do to experience the sacred and the eternal in life?”

The reason, I suspect, is that for most of us, when life is good, when we are not facing any major disappointments or obstacles, we come to think that the Christian faith has little to say to us. We don’t need the help of God to handle our good fortune. We can handle it quite well ourselves, thank you. We think of the church and of God as being something like a hospital or some other kind of emergency agency. We want it to be there and to be the best possible if and when we need it. But unless we are hurt or very sick, it’s best to stay away.

So the first truth we can get from this story that applies to your life and mine is that each one of us needs to stop regularly and evaluate what’s going on in our life, and that’s especially true when things are going well.

If you want to enjoy life more, if you want to be in contact with the sacred in life and be in touch with that which is eternal, then you need to do what this man did: stop and think. Stop and ask, does what I am doing have eternal value? You can think of STOP as an acronym for “Step back,” “Think,” “Organize your thoughts,” and “Proceed.”

One person uses this analogy: Think of a 15th-century army fighting off an enemy with swords in a valley between two mountains. While you are engaged in active fighting, your focus is very narrow. You are totally occupied with the immediate threats and opportunities within a few feet of where you are fighting.

Now imagine that you take a few moments to disengage from the action and move a few steps up the hillside. Immediately two things happen. First, you are removed from the threats and the challenges of the fight and all its physical and mental intensity. Second, your perspective has changed. From your more elevated position, you have the advantage of an expanded point of view. You may be able to see where someone needs your help or where there is an advantage to be taken, and you can change your tactics accordingly.

If you take a few more steps up the hillside and then stop, your view will be further expanded, and perhaps you can view the tactical situation of your entire division. And if you go to the very top of the hill and stop, you can view the entire valley and gain a strategic view of both armies at once. The increased disengagement and elevation from the battle will give you a broader perspective and the ability to make more clear-headed choices. If you conclude this is a battle worth fighting, you can determine where you can make your best contribution to re-engage in the battle with clarity and a renewed sense of purpose.

The STOP tool is a matter of taking those steps up the mountain and stopping in order to be sure you’re doing what you need to be doing in the present moment. Or it’s like when you are

taking a long trip in your car, and you are going somewhere that you have never been before, so you do not know the way. You need to stop from time to time to be sure you're going in the right direction. There are many little STOPS in life and some big STOPS. The man who came to Jesus with his question about eternal life was making a big stop.

As far as our faith is concerned, isn't it true for many of us that when our life's journey is moving along smoothly, we tend not to stop and ask if everything is all right or if we are going in the right direction? We tend to put our faith on the sidelines. It becomes another leisure-time activity, something we do when we have nothing else on the agenda.

One of the wonderful gifts of the Jews to the human race is the idea of taking one day of rest in seven, one day to stop, give thanks, and evaluate whether or not we are paying attention to the sacred in life; to consider whether or not we are wasting all our energy on accumulating possessions instead of what is eternal.

This man in this story from Mark's gospel is to be commended because, in the midst of living the good life, he sensed that something was missing, and he stopped to inquire how he might discover it.

The perils of poverty are well documented. Malnutrition and starvation kill 35,000 children every day. Forty million people die every year from poverty's perils — the lack of food, shelter, medical care, education, and hope.

What we forget is that possessions, wealth, and prosperity also have dangers, although they are not as obvious.

The man in this story was accustomed to paying the necessary price to achieve his goals. Therefore, he assumed that he could attain or purchase the quality of life taught and lived by Jesus. So he asked, "What must I do?" Instead of, "What kind of person do I need to become?" To him, life was an achievement, a prize to win, a commodity to be bought. It is our culture's dominant creed. Thus he asked, "What must I do?"

It is no accident that the Bible contains more warnings about the perils of possessions than the pitfalls of poverty. Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to know God's realm," or as I prefer to paraphrase it, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a person with many possessions, and for whom life is going along smoothly, to experience and accept the grace of God."

Why is this? The Bible warns us about the following perils of possessions. First of all, when you have a lot of possessions, a lot of stuff, you tend to have a false sense of security, self-assurance, and self-sufficiency. It can lead you to the assumption that what you need in life, you can buy and own, and that the meaning of life can be found in how much you possess. And if your life seems empty, it is because you need to possess even more.

This is especially important to remember on this Children's Sabbath because in our over-emphasis on possessions, we are teaching our children that the meaning of life is to be found in what one possesses, in how much stuff one has.

Life becomes an achievement earned or a commodity purchased rather than a gift gratefully received and to be enjoyed with others. God becomes another commodity to be used for

personal ends. Soon what you possess becomes intertwined with your identity. You become what you own.

That's why the Christian faith says that you need God more in good times, when you think you are living on easy street, than you do in bad times.

A second peril of possessions, especially when you have too many, is that you can be living in a fool's paradise because you come to believe that good fortune is yours because you've earned it and you deserve it. You can also come to believe that God has especially blessed you because you are so good, whereas those who have less than you do, who have more bad fortune, are getting what they deserve.

The stories in the Bible and the teachings of Jesus tell us over and over again that ultimately God is in charge. All that you have is a gift from God. In the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy quotes God as declaring, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the power to get wealth." In the New Testament, Jesus calls the man who builds bigger buildings to store all of his possessions a fool because he believes this will fill the emptiness in his life and give him immortality.

A third peril of too many possessions is that you tend to forget what Jesus said: "The more you have, the more it is that is required of you." Those who have more have a larger responsibility to manage it in a proper and responsible fashion. Those who have more are to give more. The danger is that the more you have, the more stingy you become.

A fourth peril of too many possessions is that it can cause you to lose your soul. Jesus said, "What does it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?" To lose your soul means you lose your identity as one who has been created in the image of God. You forget the importance of your relationship with other people and with God. You can even come to imagine that you are God.

To lose your own soul means that your priorities are all out of order. If your security is rooted in your achievements, your possessions, and in your status, then achieving more and maintaining and increasing what you have becomes your driving motivation. You can't stop. You can't let up. You can't relax. You can't give cheerfully. To do so threatens your security and your sense of worth, and in the process, you have lost your soul.

Possessions can become addictive. The more you have, the more you are afraid you won't have enough, and this inhibits your giving. Jesus sensed this addiction in the man who came to him. This man could not understand life as grace, as a gift to be given away, a gift available without price, a gift that could not be earned.

On this Children's Sabbath, it's important for us to consider what we are teaching our children and grandchildren about the addiction of possessions and how that addiction has nothing to do with eternal values on which to base one's life. Amen.