

Inherit Eternal Life
Year B 20th Sunday after Pentecost 10.10.2021
Rev. Emily Zimbrick-Rogers
St. David's 8 am, 9.15 am

“Good Teacher, What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The ultimate question, asked by a thoughtful, wise, godly seeker. Yet the story illustrates the limits of human understanding and the need for divine inspiration and grace in the ultimate call of discipleship—follow and stay with Jesus.

What must *I do* ... the questioner is emphasizing both active deeds and the individual focus on me, myself, and I. A few verses before Jesus told the crowds that to enter the kingdom of God a person had to *be* like a little child. A Christian meditation teacher that I love, Dr. Noel Keating, said, “One could make a case that nowadays we should be called human *doings* rather than human *beings*.” The man is asking for a list so he can know where he stands in the scavenger hunt of faith.

How can I *inherit* eternal life? Inheritance isn't based on what we do. By its very definition it is a gift given by the goodwill of the giver.

Most of us in Christianity buy into this idea of earning prizes or gifts. Last week at the fair, I worked with a middle school youth for a few hours at the soccer kick game at the midway. One child—or parent—asked, “What will I get if I kick the ball through the holes?” In previous years you could earn tickets and then the number of tickets would match certain prizes. This year, the brilliant people who

organize the midway came up a wonderful simplification to focus more on play and less on winning prizes. So I said, “I’ll cheer for you if you get it through. I’ll cheer for you, even if you don’t get it through the goal.”

Perhaps this is what Jesus is saying to this man—you’ll find me on the way, in the process, in the giving, and in the following, not in the earning of prizes and accolades.

For most of us, that’s sort of disappointing. Like the rich man, I want to win at everything, including being or doing good things for God. It’s pretty easy to see that our secular culture elevates the rich, the powerful, the beautiful, the talented. But it’s also true that for most of history, Christianity has operated out of a prosperity framework. This is a fairly universal worldview from ancient times to today that God blesses or rewards good people with tangible gifts such as health, wealth, prosperity, and happiness. It’s an easy thing to see in others (pointing the finger at pastors who buy private airplanes or the king of Jordan who was just exposed for hiding lavish properties or the ultra-rich who avoid paying taxes). But we find it harder to see it operate in ourselves.

This worldview is the background to the Job story. In our Job reading today we hear Job complaining bitterly to God for not understanding why he is suffering so much. His friends and family have told him he must have sinned against God to

be punished with loss of wealth, property, lives of his children, and his own physical health.

We hear this upright, outstanding citizen shocked at Jesus' invitation to go, sell what he owns, and give the money to the poor, and then come and follow him. We hear about a prosperity mindset from the disciples, who are really shocked that wealth isn't a sign of one's future salvation. We don't quite know how to interpret Peter's exclamation, but it seems like he is seeking reassurance of this worldview—We have left everything and followed you! (Don't we get some sort of reward?)

Every time I read this passage I am shocked and disturbed too—Most of America is incredibly rich compared to the rest of the world—Can I or any of us be saved? What is Jesus asking me to do? Can I follow him as radically as he is asking? Do I sometimes just want to make sure I have done enough to earn a prize?

Jesus' reply is cryptic, saying that those who have left things for his sake and for the sake of the good news will receive now (but with persecutions!) and in the age to come. And the last will be first and the first last. To be honest, most of us don't really understand everything he's saying here. But we don't have to understand it perfectly to begin to follow, or continue to follow, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Our Hebrews reading also points to this hard calling—the word of God judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart, and we will give an account of how we have followed Jesus. I tend to go toward the grace and love in Christianity and not as often the hard requirements of following Jesus. Jesus doesn't apologize to the rich man or the disciples about what it means to walk with him to Jerusalem to the cross.

Jesus asks of us individually or communally different things, though all with an expression of love in his eyes and the grace to enable us. While Jesus calls individuals, this story also highlights Jesus' focus—away from obsession about individual salvation toward care for others and community. Jesus asked the man to go and interact personally with the poor, putting himself in their community as equals—and then join Jesus' community of followers. Faith matters in the quiet deep places of our hearts, but also in our relationships with each other and the world, in every single area of our individual and communal lives.

In the last few weeks, I've talked with many people in this congregation and in other settings about how to put their faith into practice, both individually and communally. There is no textbook on the 10 steps to perfectly practicing our faith, but with prayer, honest seeking, and community, we will be able to respond differently to Jesus than the rich man.

Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus asks us to come and follow him.

What this looks like specifically is personal. I can't tell you what Jesus is asking or inviting you. But we can walk together as faithfully as possible, supporting one another, in this path of discipleship. This is where spiritual direction, both individually and group direction, can be so life-changing. This is why we also encourage everyone to be in some sort of Bible study or small group community like youth group or choir, in addition to doing weekly prayer and Bible reading practices and service.

This story reminds us that following Jesus is not necessarily easy—and in fact, it seems almost too difficult for the rich man and for the disciples.

Here is the flip side of the coin of this invitation Jesus offers. Jesus isn't asking the rich man, his disciples, or us to be or do something that is impossible. The Grace of Christ *always* precedes and follows us. Jesus' request or invitation is one of love. With God all things are possible. The Holy Spirit gives us the grace and ability and power to heed the call. As Hebrews says, we may approach the throne of grace with boldness, so we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.