



October 14, 2018 - Sell, Give, Follow Given by Rev. Mattei

[The Word] is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

How much is enough? We have probably asked that question when considering our monetary donations for the ministry of the Church. How much are we returning to God for God's goodness to us? The Bible suggests 10% or a tithe ([Leviticus 27:30-32](#)). How much are we keeping for ourselves? 90%, 95%, 99%? How much is enough for us to live on? A better question: How long does it take for us to learn how to trust God ([Romans 8:32](#))? God loves a cheerful giver ([2 Corinthians 9:7](#)); what about a grumpy one?

In today's gospel ([Mark 10:17-31](#)) a young devout man approaches Jesus with humility and integrity, really desiring the ultimate Good, life eternal. He wants to learn more about the faith from the Master: what he has done so far doesn't feel good enough, doesn't seem sufficient to satisfy his spiritual hunger. In fact, how can it? There is just so much assurance in obeying divinely inspired prescriptions. Obedience is not a convincing enough strategy to give us the confidence of being given life eternal no matter how much one feels good about "doing" things for others or how responsible one tries to be by "keeping" the commandments in reverence to God. Ultimately, it's not about us trying to muster enough trust in God. The focus is not us and our fears. The focus becomes the gracious and unconditional love of God.

Jesus looks at him not with contempt or disapproval but lovingly. The young man is aware of the requirements of the faith and has obeyed the commandments all along, but he is not bosting or requesting acknowledgments. How many of us go around feeling pretty satisfied with ourselves: "I am a good person." we emphatically declare; "Nothing to lament or regret." What do we base that on? Can we truly keep the Commandments?

For the most part, when people are watching, we are law abiding citizens. I will admit it: when I go over the speed limit I take comfort in the knowledge that I am going at the traffic speed. Jesus looks lovingly at me also. Jesus looks lovingly at us when we pat ourselves on the back for feeding the hungry and giving to the poor. When that happens, we have already received our reward ([Matthew 6:1-4](#)). But his loving look penetrates to the heart; his living and active Word is also capable of separating joints

from marrow ([Hebrews 4:12-16](#)); His love sees clearly and speaks truthfully. Salvation or eternal life is experienced when we are liberated from the things that hold us captive, anything that we deem indispensable and can't do without: our idea of safety and security, of influence and prestige, of health and well-being, of creativity and self-expression. Lacking any of that can cause us to fear and feel defeated, a failure. They are not evil per se. In fact, they are fundamental to the human experience. The challenge is to exercise enough discipline not to absolutize them or become addicted, paranoid and enslaved by them. Hence, the wise adage to learn to count one's days ([Psalm 90:12](#)) and make a purposeful use of them.

Learning how to be detached from what has become "our possessions" reorients us toward the Giver of all gifts.

The young man's honesty is disarming and Jesus looking at him simply loves him ([v. 21](#)). In fact, He's the only person in the entire Gospel of Mark singled out as being loved by Jesus. And yet, as soon as this deeply loved person hears from Jesus to go, sell his possessions on behalf of the poor and then follow him, he walks away shocked, disheartened and sorrowful because he has many possessions. How disturbing and tragic to realize that, after all, the young man loves his stuff more than he loves life eternal.

Love of money, the Bible tells us, is the root of all evil ([Ecclesiastes 5:10](#); [Luke 16:14](#); [1 Timothy 6:10](#); [2 Timothy 3:2](#)). Jesus had earlier warned his disciples not to consider pursuing the privileges of life more important than following him ([Mark 8:34-36](#)). Jesus is not against a comfortable life and wealth. He warns us against possessions, those material things as well as life systems (psycho-socio-economic constructs) we think we have under control but by their very nature end up possessing us because we become so blindly attached to them that we go to any length to protect and elevate them above anything and anyone. They become our favorite idols because we depend on them to give us meaning and value, hope and security. To the young man not only his wealth but also his religion has become possessions. He could see neither who it was that was talking to him nor that the liberation that life eternal is capable of delivering was available right there and then (something similar to the woman at the well, who at least kept her options open: see [John 4:1-42](#)). Jesus is our liberation if we are willing and ready to take him in. The anonymous, 14th century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* explained: Nobody's mind is powerful enough to grasp who God is. We can only know [God] by experiencing [God's] love.

And Jesus was telling the young man how to experience God's love by following him.

God is immediately available to us ever since the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ([John 1:14](#)): The Word became one of us, in our local environment, made up of people, laws, cultures, traditions, job market, family dynamics, educational systems, political discourses, interpersonal interactions: God's Word did not enter a vacuum. Following Jesus means loving the world his way: caring, showing compassion, being ready to forgive, procuring freedom from demons and domination powers which stand ready to confuse and abuse us (not only through greed, lies and corruption but also through the socio-economic and political systems that turn from their original purpose of seeking the common good to pursuing their own self-preservation and self-bloating).

The Word of God continues to be involved for a more just and equitable world through us. God has consistently favored the disadvantaged, the exploited, the vulnerable: check out Amos ([5:6-15](#)). In light of that tradition, should the Church remain prophetic or pursue a politically neutral, emotionally indifferent and spiritually lukewarm stance?¹ How is the Body of Christ a spiritual as well as a physical, living body of flesh and bones, subject to the basic needs of shelter, food, safety, freedom, creativity? What shape does liberation take? What does Shalom (i.e. wholeness, harmony and peace among people) look like?

Our attention to the joys and horrors of life is but an attempt at catching up with God who has never retreated from the world. Our concerns over the well-being of all nations, our response to hunger, violence, tragedy, displacement, injustice are but an expression of the compassion of God moving through us, a manifestation of our decisive willingness to let go of our possessions and trust God. It's like going through a stress test or better yet a compassion compatibility test (the eye of a needle) to follow Jesus. But how do we do that? If we look at ourselves we may feel sad and discouraged: we may not feel confident about the level of our trust. Is there a way to learn that trust? Is it even possible to trust that much? Leave it to God. God's grace and mercy will fill in the gap. We learn by doing. We learn by loving. We learn by keeping young as a child, open hearted and open minded, catching any opportunity to help and to bless. Giving becomes a privilege and not a duty. Yet, because it's so dependent on our relationship with God, we pray and meditate and renew that relationship every day, every moment, aware that each moment is fleeting and we may miss the opportunity of being with Jesus ([Isaiah 55:6](#)).

An international witnessing opportunity: This month we are invited to participate in the Synod wide campaign Seeds for Haiti: The Lutheran Church in Haiti (ELH) is one of our

¹ https://www.openbible.info/topics/lukewarm_christians

companion churches. We want to help replant crops. Drought resistant seeds will be purchased in Haiti; 10% of seeds are returned to the Church and saved for future distribution to other farmers.

A local witnessing opportunity: Friday, November 2nd: The faith community of Nativity will be present at the Chamber of Commerce 's 18th Annual Hernando County Residents' Reception with an outdoor booth staffed by our own members and displaying photos and literature of activities we are all engaged in. The event will be a good opportunity to showcase our commitment to our Lord through our love for God's Church and neighbor.

May the Good Lord continue to reveal his face to us and give more opportunities to love and serve him. Amen.