

Sermon  
“The Word of the Lord???”  
First Presbyterian Church  
November 11, 2018  
David Partington

**At 10:30**

Gospel Reading Mark 10:17-27

The Rich Man

17 As he (Jesus) was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’”

20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, [c] “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

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# 455 Listen to the Word That God Has Spoken

The musical score is written on three staves in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. The lyrics are: Lis - ten to the word that God has spo - ken; lis - ten to the One who is close at hand; lis - ten to the voice that be - gan cre - a - tion; lis - ten e - ven if you don't un - der - stand.

*May be sung as a round, successive voices entering ad lib.*

Like "Open Your Ears, O Faithful People" (see no. 453), this short song from Canada is an encouragement to pay attention to what God is saying. The significance of the text is enhanced by singing this piece as a round, allowing the overlapping phrases to yield a single message.

TEXT: Anon. Canadian, alt.  
MUSIC: Anon. Canadian; adapt. *Church Hymnary, 4th Edition, 2005*

LISTEN  
10.10.11.10

That is a nifty little tune. It is kind of a catchy little tune. There is a nice lilt to it. Let's sing it together. Give back to me what I sing to you. We will have a little choir rehearsal.

The words are clear and direct and are an invitation to listen, really listen to the word of God. Listen to the voice of the one who shouted this universe and our planet earth into existence with those commanding words: "Let there be light."

Listen to the word that God has spoken;

Listen to the One who is close at hand;

Listen to the voice that began creation;

Listen even if you don't understand.

Last Sunday, Brian Blount, President of Union Presbyterian Sermon was in town. He preached at Guilford Park Presbyterian Church, talked to Alumni and supporters at an early reception in our Garden Room, and lectured at Westminster Presbyterian Church at 5:00 pm The title of his lecture ‘The Bible Is Bigger Than the Church: Why Biblical Theology Is Engaged in Public Theology.’”

As he began his lecture he posed a question for our consideration:

“Across the centuries, there has been much debate about the place and role of the church in the matters of social justice.

Is the church a spiritual institution that should deal only with matters of the individual’s broken personal relationship with God and healing that relationship?”

“Or, is the church a spiritual institution whose area of concern is as vast as God’s own arena of concern, the fullness of the created cosmos and the ways in which humans relate to that creation and to each other in the communities that are an integral part of that creation? “

He went on to say that “As important as the question is there is another question about the determination about who gets to answer the question? And on what basis should such an answer be made?”

Continuing with his remarks he said:” It is commonplace for persons of Christian faith to answer the question about the church as a spiritual institution by simply saying that Jesus is the one who has the answer to the question.”

The problem is, he argued,” that today Christians don’t really know Jesus. Many Christian people, don’t know the stories that share the essence of the man they don’t really know.”

In a moment of lamentation Brian shared the results of a Gallup poll of Americans and their knowledge of the basics of Christianity some years ago. He offered a few tidbits from that poll:

*--Only 37% of those interviewed could name all four Gospels.*

*-- Only half of adults interviewed nationwide could name any of the four Gospels of the New Testament.*

*-- Seven in ten (70%) were able to name the town where Jesus was born, but just 42% could identify him as the person who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.*

In lamentation he said: “How can a world know a man if they don’t know the materials which testify to how the man lived and died.”

If today, as Christians, we have something to say to these troubled times from a Biblical perspective, we must start by knowing who Jesus is and what he stood for. And We can only do that if we know the scriptures that chronicle his life and ministry.

As the people of God, children of the Reformation, knowing the Word of God is central to our faith. *Sola Scriptura, Scripture Only* as Nate reminded us last Sunday was one of the battle cries of the Reformation.

Do we hold the word of God in Holy Scripture as a central tenant of our faith and do we know the words of Jesus and how his words would enable us “to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?”

About a month ago the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem pulled together the full resources of all the Departments for a production of Leonard Bernstein’s MASS. The work is a theater piece that is shaped by the various movements of the Roman Mass but interspersed between those movements we come face to face with the struggles for faith by those in the post Kennedy and Vietnam era who were struggling for faith.

Struggles for faith, trust and hope in God are here in the pews this morning. They are present unannounced every Sunday. Here at First Presbyterian Church and in every church and synagogue there is the invitation to not only hear but understand and trust the word of God.

For me the Leonard Bernstein Mass is a powerful work. I first experienced it at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary performance, then again, a few years ago when the Baltimore Symphony led by Marin Alsop I returned to the Kennedy Center for another performance.

It was pure gift to experience the recent. UNCSA all school performance at the Steven’s Center in Winston-Salem. As each of those performances closed I found myself deeply moved and riveted to my seat as the cascading melodies washed over me.

In the MASS when the WORD is read and proclaimed the Celebrant affirms these affirmations of the power of God’s WORD.

*You can lock up the bold men,  
go and lock up your bold men and hold  
men in tow,  
you can stifle all adventure  
for a century or so.  
Smother hope before it’s risen,  
watch it wizen like a gourd,  
but you cannot imprison the Word of the Lord.*

*For the Word was at the birth of the  
beginning,  
it made the heavens and the earth and set  
them spinning,  
and for several million years*

*it's endured all our forums and fine ideas.  
It's been rough, but it appears to be  
winning!*

*There are people who doubt it and shout  
it out loud,  
oh, they bellow, and they bluster 'til they  
muster up a crowd.*

*They can fashion a rebuttal that's as subtle  
as a sword,  
but they're never gonna scuttle the Word  
of the Lord.*

*For the Word created mud and got it going,  
it filled our empty brains with blood and  
set it flowing,  
and for thousands of regimes  
it's endured all our follies and fancy schemes.  
It's been tough, and yet it seems to be  
growing!*

The Word of the Lord.

The Word of the Lord in the story of Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler takes us right to the center of the hard words of Jesus. By any standard you and I are rich and for that reason it is a very difficult story to hear. It is also a very important story for us to hear.

You might have preferred that after I read those hard words of Jesus that I said: "This is the Word of the Lord???" and you might have responded: "Thanks be to God???"

Several years ago, when our son Willis was for seven years a full-time volunteer at a homeless shelter for 1300 people in Washington, D.C. he asked me: “Dad, how much is enough?” “Dad, how much is enough?”

The story of the rich young ruler leaves us asking the same question. We will this morning present, our pledges to support the ministry of our congregation on the coming year. In our life together as the children of God I suspect that “How much is enough” question sometimes haunt us even during Stewardship Season and on Stewardship Sunday.

The words of Jesus in this story are both hard words and disorienting words. Jesus is very clear with that young rich man about the way in which his wealth is a barrier to experiencing the fullness of the Kingdom of God:

The rich young ruler has all the answers and thinks that he gets an A+ in inheriting eternal life: “I’ve kept all of the commandments since my youth.”

Then we hear “Jesus, looking at him, loving him and saying: “You lack one thing: sell what you own, and give the money, to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: then come follow me.” (GULP!)

The hard words of Jesus: This is the word of the Lord???”

How do we hear those words? Do you hear them as full-blown hyperbole from the lips of Jesus.??

When he talks to the young man owned by his possessions and wealth is he just “pulling his leg?” When those words are addressed to us is there not part of us that thinks that Jesus is just kidding with us?

The hard words continue from the lips of Jesus in his words to his disciples: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

And the disciples say, “Then who has any chance at all?”

Okay David, we hear you but where is the Grace . . . where is the Amazing Grace? .....  
During those hard words from Jesus there is another word of Grace.

“Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible . . . “no chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it.”

This is the word of the Lord. There is hope for all of us: , “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible . . . “no chance at all if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it.”

**One Last Time . . . Sing with me!**

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**Amen!**