

“Rich Young Man” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
October 11, 2009 – Proper 23B

This is probably a familiar story for many of you. It’s often referred to as the story of the rich young ruler. But before we go too far I want to give you a little Scripture trivia that I picked up this week: Mark is the only one who calls this character rich; Matthew is the only one who calls him young and Luke is the only one who calls him a ruler. Nowhere is this guy actually presented as all the things we know him to be, nonetheless, we have these bits that we’ve collected into one character and as we tell the story how we tell it we basically assume the pieces to be true. And I’m not sure the assumptions are all that wrong. After all, this guy is someone who as one author I read this week put it, “Doesn’t seem to have many immediate concerns.” Just think about his question compared to all of the other requests we hear in the gospels: he doesn’t come asking for food or forgiveness or healing or acceptance of any kind. Which might actually make his question unique. Most everyone else comes forward to Jesus seeking some kind of wholeness and healing here and now. They want to see or hear or walk or eat or be cured or be recognized that society doesn’t recognize them. But this man comes forward with a different kind of question, one that indicates he doesn’t have too much to worry about in this life, he’s far more concerned about the next one. Which is where some of the assumptions come from. He was wealthy enough to not be concerned about food or shelter or clothing. He was young enough not to have any major health concerns. And he was ruler enough to have some sort of status and power in society.

Yet even though he probably was rich and young and powerful the first thing I like about this story is that Jesus treated him just like he treated everyone else. Jesus didn’t say something like “You sure look like you’re doing OK, so you probably are. Stop wasting my time and let me tend to those who really need me.” He didn’t even ask the guy to step to the back of the line behind the blind and the lame and the lepers, instead he honored the young man’s question. “What must you do to inherit eternal life? Well,” Jesus said, “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.’” The man then added “faithful” to his list of rich, young and ruler by responding that he’d kept all of the commandments since he was a kid. So he was the sort of guy who could get on your nerves after a while – by all appearances he had it all without even having suffered any bruises or breaks, or made any mistakes that needed to be healed. But the first point of this story is that Jesus knew better and so did the young man. Even given appearances, Jesus could hear that the rich young ruler’s request was about hunger and wholeness and healing too. It’s just came in a different shape than what we’re used to. The first message of this story is that nobody has it all. Even those who seem to have it all (no matter what we project onto them whoever they are); even “they” don’t have it all. And the gospel says that Jesus looked at the young man and loved him.

But then came the second message of this story which is that what we have can get in the way of what we need. “What will it take to experience salvation?” wondered the rich, young, faithful ruler. “Well, as much as you’ve got going for you, you lack one thing,” Jesus told him, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” It was that simple. And that hard. And the young man was stunned, “shocked” the gospel says, “because he had many possessions.” Maybe he imagined Jesus would tell him

exactly what more he needed to acquire for himself or what more he needed to do for himself in order to find that eternal peace for which he so longed. Instead Jesus told the rich, young, faithful man that he had to let go in order to receive. He had to let go of all that he had in order to make room for that which was only gift. It was that simple. And it was that hard.

And the gospel says that he went away grieving. And I think it's because what he learned that day was that while he was rich and young and powerful and faithful, he wasn't free. He had great possessions that he lugged behind him like a "ball and chain." I read this week that the rich, young, powerful man is the only one in the gospel of Mark who walked away from the invitation to follow, the only hurting one who declined to be healed. "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God," Jesus said. And apparently he was right.

Not because the stuff itself is bad. There are millions and millions of people in this world who would probably give their sight or their hearing or their ability to walk in order to share some of the stuff that we have. In order to be fed or clothed or sheltered. This passage isn't telling us that money itself is evil -- in fact it can be used to help meet basic needs that aren't getting met and I think the gospel is telling us that that's how it should be used. Not to build up more for those who have but to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and give shelter to those who have none. It's that simple. And that hard. If you are someone who has stuff.

So a couple of things to take with us today. By virtue of being born in this part of the world have a lot. We are the rich and the powerful in this world. The most rich or the most powerful but by world scales we are all way up there. The kicker is that our wealth is not a means to freedom, not true freedom -- it can actually get in the way of our receiving that which only comes by grace. And so our choice everyday is to walk away from that reality grieving or to begin to give in a way that not only serves others but frees us up to better receive that which we need.

Amen.

But wealth can also deceive, making those who have it dependent on it rather than on God for things like safety, contentment, peace, hope. It can get in the way of being free.

Old grudges? Self-doubt? Possessions? Cynicism? Whatever it is that you think holds you together, keeps you safe or whole.

Which meant that if this guy really was known as the rich young ruler he would lose his identity. Giving away his possessions would make him poor. Odds are good he wouldn't have ruler status at that point and unless he did it overnight he might not even be young at the end of it all. And so what Jesus was telling him to do is to let go of everything that he leaned on that made him who he was and to take one big hunk of a leap into the only identity he needed, child of God.

If you need to get rid of money, remember the Church.

I think it's all fear based. If the man in the Bible who is even known to us as the Rich young ruler gave away all he had, he would lose his identity. He wouldn't be rich. He certainly wouldn't rule. And maybe by the time he got around to it he wouldn't even be young. It's about identity. I am child of God and that's all. I am many other things too, some of which I believe bring me closer to God but none of which are why God is close to me. None of which is why I have a shot at eternity. None of which make me better or closer to heaven than anyone else.