

<sup>12</sup> For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. <sup>13</sup> And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

<sup>17</sup> And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>18</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" <sup>20</sup> And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." <sup>21</sup> And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." <sup>22</sup> Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Last Sunday evening, you may remember, we announced that we were having "hobo soup" for our meal at NFL ministry night. That experience was a good one, in which everyone brought soup ingredients and we mixed them all together in a pot and shared the common pot. It reminded me of, but was not quite like, an old parable you may have heard:

Once there was a chief of a tribe whose fortunes had been good that year. The crops had been bountiful and the storehouses were full. To celebrate and to give thanks, the chief said that he would host a great feast for everyone in the tribe. He would provide all of the food and entertainment. The only thing he asked was that each family would bring one jug of wine that they would pour into a large vat. Then everyone would share the drink.

One of the tribesmen, we'll call him Alonzo, shared a secret with his wife. "I'm going to take a jug of water, instead of our good wine. If everyone else brings wine, no one will notice that our jug is just water."

"Oh, no!" said his wife. "That is cheating."

"No one will know the difference. That way we will share the community wine, and still have plenty for ourselves here at home."

That night a great feast was had. Everyone came and poured their jugs into the community vat. The tribal chief had delivered to each person plates heaped up with the finest of rich foods. This was going to be a celebration unlike anyone could remember.

Then the tribal chief instructed that everyone take a goblet of wine and he would propose a toast. When all the goblets were filled, and raised in the common method of toasting, the chief said, "***May we give thanks to God for our good fortunes, and for this whole next year, may everyone receive according to their thanksgiving. Drink up!***"

The chief drank and everyone drank. And they all drank nothing but water. No one would look at the chief, nor at anyone else.

You can imagine what the atmosphere for the rest of the feast was like.

In the Gospel lesson for today, we heard about the man who rushed up to Jesus and asked Him for something that he did not have. That's a strange sort of thought, isn't it, because we learn that this man was a wealthy man, and possessed much. But there was something that he lacked, and he asked Jesus to give him that. What was it that he lacked? Hmmm?

And Jesus told him what he must give up – all his wealth – to give to the poor. I've often heard people ask if that is what we all must do. My answer to folks is that we should never take what Jesus does with one person and say that this is the formula for everyone. ***Jesus knows what we each need.***

Do you remember when the resurrected Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene at the garden of the tomb on Easter morning. ***He knew what Mary wanted, and he also knew what Mary needed.*** And He told her not to touch His body. Later the same resurrected Jesus appeared to His disciple Thomas, the one who doubted. ***Jesus knew what Thomas wanted and he also knew what Thomas needed.*** For Thomas, unlike for Mary, Jesus said to "let his fingers do their walking" into the wounds of His body.

***Jesus knows what we want and Jesus knows what we need.***

In discussing today's Gospel lesson with another pastor, now serving in a local church, but who used to be a professional counselor, he told me:

***I've seen this situation play out in from of me many times. I've had folks over the years come seeking help for addictions, relational difficulties, etc. and ask a similar question, "What must I do to find help, peace, hope, renewal, etc.?" Here's an example. A man walks into my office in the midst of an affair. He wants to talk about whether he should stay with his wife or leave her and go with his new girlfriend. My answer was, and is, always the same: In order to make a decision about the marriage, you have to first get rid of the girlfriend. Unless you do that first, you cannot make honest efforts to discern the future of the marriage. On more than one occasion, the man has left my office sadly because he could not do what I was telling him was necessary to accomplish his goal.***

So often *we want what we want, but are not willing to do what is required in order to receive it.*

We live in an age, a culture, that radically believes in the Burger King original theme: *“Have it your way.”*

**We have come to worship “CHOICE” as the god of our age.**

Perhaps our culture and time is no different from that of the rich man who came up to Jesus two millennia ago. Maybe it just seems that our consumeristic “I want it MY way” culture is more profoundly depraved.

But the **answer today** for us is **no different** than it was for the rich man seeking “one thing” from Jesus – eternal life: *You can’t get it YOUR way, regardless of how much you WANT that; you only get it “GOD’S WAY.”*

There can be NO one thing that you are willing to hold back.

**I know, I know. We celebrate GRACE – the abundant and free gift from God. We can’t earn it. It’s a gift.**

**And that IS true. It is FREE, but it is not cheap.**

God is not a pushover any more than was the tribal chief in that first story that I told.

- **God is not the Creator of the Universe and the Giver of all Gifts, and STUPID.**
- **Nor is God a cosmic Santa Claus who simply sits around waiting to hear what we WANT.**

Throughout His ministry and teaching, Jesus teaches about “God’s economy.” Like in today’s parable. And like in the Prayer that Jesus taught: *“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*

THAT is God’s economy. **If we want forgiveness, we must be willing to forgive. If we are not willing to forgive, then it’s not that God won’t forgive, it’s that we are not able to receive it.**

I am sometimes amazed by people who say, *“I’d love to do work in the church, to do work for God, but not now. My first obligation is to my children. I’ll take care of my work for the church later.”*

Part of what amazes me is:

(1) **what lesson do they think they are teaching their children who are watching them?**

(2) **how the “children excuse” later turns into “my career” or “my financial security” and on and on up through the “I’m old and too tired to do this; let the younger people do it.”**

And (3) **how people can put all sorts of things before God throughout their whole life and then when a crisis comes along, they EXPECT God to do what they want. “Oh, Lord, my child is sick. Please, please, please, come and work a miracle.”**

Oh, don’t get me wrong. God does not charge for things. BUT ***we cannot have a meaningful relationship with God when we put ANYTHING ahead of God.***

That’s the lesson from the Gospel. God will not take second place to ANYTHING in anyone’s life. Put anything else ahead of God and you cannot live an abundant, meaningful, eternal, lifegiving life.

**God doesn’t reject us; we reject God.**

Or – to be more fair – we want God as part of our Burger King lifestyle. “Surely God doesn’t want me to give up ... [fill in the blank.]”

In reality, **if we want to have a living relationship with God, then we need to understand, “Surely we don’t want to put ... [fill in the blank] in front of God in our life.” That’s not GUILT, that’s just reality.**

I make it a practice, and keep it stringently, that I do not know what anyone gives in their financial offering to the church. In some recent financial analysis that the Stewardship and Finance and Worship Committees have been discussing, it has come to our attention that there are a number of people who attend this church who do not give ANYTHING financially to the church. Not “less than they should” not “less they can” but “NOTHING.”

In trying to sort through all of that – just what it means, how to deal with it, etc. – there are some people in positions of leadership who make the argument that the senior pastor, or SOMEBODY, needs to have that information in order to hold people accountable.

I’ve not been convinced, however, to change my policy. For in the scripture lesson we heard from Hebrews:

***“No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”***

It's hard for me to believe that people are more concerned about accountability with their pastor than they are with the almighty God. People would simply complain if they thought the pastor knew what they gave. But people can complain all they want about God knowing; their complaints are not going to change reality.

The Gospel is NOT a Burger King Gospel.

***God knows what we want and God knows what we need.*** For that I am glad, and I am glad that God does not bargain with me according to my wants in order that my needs are not met.

As my mentor in ministry often told me:

***“We may all go to heaven, by God's grace, but that doesn't mean everyone will be happy about it. If people aren't willing to put God first here and now, to trust God here and now, to practice generosity here and now, then what in the world makes them think they will be happy in heaven?”***

Life is a gift from God. And life is a classroom in which we learn about God by learning that there are consequences.

- When we put things in life before God,
- when we put God onto a smorgasbord of choices,
- then we ought not be surprised that when we need God to be in charge of everything, that we simply are not able to wrap our faith around such a notion.

God is indeed in charge. But God will not force us to believe that. If we choose to make God small, then we ought not be surprised by the consequence of our inability to trust God to be large.

This message today, I have wrestled with mightily, because it might not seem like “Good News” which I believe and know the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be. But I content myself today with the notion that ***“Good News” is to help people understand what they need and not always just what they want.*** I may want to eat Twinkies only, but that doesn't mean that I will be healthy.

But then I went back again and read the Gospel to see where we are told that immediately before Jesus told this rich man to go and sell all that he had ... we are told that Jesus LOVED HIM. Jesus was not doing this as guilt-tripping, or trying to trip him up. Jesus was doing it because he was doing so much right, and yet was missing the boat because of this one thing. Jesus WANTED him to get it right. Jesus loved him.

I may WANT God to be just what I want. But that is not good news if I base my life on a fairy tale instead of reality. I need to hear about what I NEED. Because Jesus loves me that much!

What will be in your jug of wine that you bring to the party? As the tribal chief's toast said: "***May we give thanks to God for our good fortunes, and for this whole next year, may everyone receive according to their thanksgiving. Drink up!***"

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.