

October 13, 2024

Participation

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Before you make any assumptions: yes, I swear that this morning's Gospel reading is from the Revised Common Lectionary and not a text the Stewardship Committee and I hand-picked for the first Sunday in our Stewardship Campaign

We're a little more...subtle than that!

What a text!?

Matt Skinner, NT scholar says: "this story is untamable...it resists simple explanations and denies loopholes, making us so uncomfortable that we are liable to talk circles around it in hope of stumbling upon a basis for softening its message"¹

Last week, I mentioned that one of the three tenets of the order of Saint Francis is poverty – as it is for many of the religious orders

There are many who take this story quite literally and quite to heart, that any sort of riches are an obstacle to entry into heaven and therefore must completely be given up

While others have interpreted this text to say that this specific instruction from Jesus is for this specific person – another person's impediment to following Jesus might be something else that they have to give up and this text might not be about riches *specifically* after all

Those feel like ends of an interpretation spectrum that I think both have some theological soundness to them, but as you might expect from me by

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28-2/commentary-on-mark-1017-31-4>

now, my reading and thinking about this text desired something that weaved through the middle of this spectrum

Ragan Sutterfield, an Episcopal Priest writing for the Ekklesia Project, helped me find it this time

Ragan points out that this text is *both* about riches *and* it is about this specific person, but Ragan focuses his reflection on the man's question to Jesus: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

You see, Ragan points out that inheritance is likely the very source of this man's riches in the first place – in the ancient world, you didn't have a lot of "pick yourself up by the bootstraps and make something of yourself" happening, it is much more likely that if this man is described as "rich" then he was the beneficiary of inheritance, specifically: land

This man's question about eternal life, is how can he *inherit* it? How can he possess it?

Perhaps Jesus doesn't fully get the meaning of his question at first which is why Jesus says to the rich man: "You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.'" etc.

In rattling off some of the 10 Commandments, Jesus is in a way saying "you recall the ways our people have covenanted to be in relationship with God, don't you? You remember how our God has set a path for us to be the people of the way?"

And maybe it's something in his voice, or it's his next comment ("I have done all of that" basically) that Jesus realizes the fixation and misunderstanding this man has

"I have followed all the rules, now how do I make it mine?"

And Jesus answers: "you need to not *possess* anything"

Ragan writes: “Jesus calls the rich young man to follow him by letting go of his inheritance and joining a new economy, and that call echoes down to us. [And,] what is this new economy? Jesus describes it in his answer to Peter, and its truth is echoed in the Sermon on the Plain, the Sermon on the Mount, and many other teachings of Jesus. The economy of God’s reign is a place of participation, not possession.”²

Participation, *not* possession

This is a major shift in thinking for the rich man, so much so that he goes away grieving, and it can be a major shift in thinking for many church-goers these days, too

It shifts the thinking that faith, in some way, only has meaning in what it offers to “me” – to faith has meaning by how I participate *in it, in* the journey, the way

As Tim Bowman, a process theologian, writes: “Relinquishing our hold on our possessions” – or possession, as a noun, “does not earn us a ticket to heaven, but is rather a step in the process of entering more deeply into life in God.”³

Participation, *not* possession

It shifts the thinking that you come to church every week to sit in the chairs and to passively experience something in worship, to the true meaning of the word “liturgy” – the word that describes what we do and say in our worship services – which means “the work of the people,” the participation of the people - in other words your engagement in what we do each week matters and worship has no meaning unless you participate

² <https://www.ekklesiaproject.org/lectionary/2024/10/8/from-possession-to-participation>

³ <https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/the-twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-proper-23-october-13-2024/>

It shifts the belief that the church exists for you, externally of you – to the truth that the church exists because of your desire to be in relationship with the great Creator we call “God” and your participation in pursuing it

Jesus set out to create a community of participation, not possession, and many of us still need to let go of possession in order to participate like the man in this morning’s story

I sometimes wonder if it’s not a lack of desire to participate in the way of Jesus, after all, you’re all here or watching online this morning – I think the desire is there, what we might be lacking is the understanding of what we have to offer: the how and what of participation

For Saint Paul, the author of many of our Epistles except not Hebrews like we read from today, he believed that our participation in God’s kingdom had a lot to do with the gifts the Spirit had bestowed upon us to utilize

In Romans 12, Paul writes: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

We all have received gifts from God that are our tools for the participation Jesus is inviting us into

What are yours? Have you ever thought about it?

What if I told you there was a way to find out?

Over this summer, I’ve done some research to find some tools for us all to figure out our Spiritual Gifts and I have compiled a Spiritual Gifts Inventory to help us

In the spirit of this morning’s gospel, encouraging us to participate and not possess the kingdom of God, and in the spirit of our Stewardship

Campaign which also asks participation of us, I am encouraging all of us to take some intentional time over the next week to discern our spiritual gifts and how they might contribute (read: participate) to the life of faith that we are striving for together at St. Bart's

General Introduction to the Spiritual Gifts Inventory

This is not homework, it is invitation – don't go away grieving like the rich man, please consider it purely an offering and gift

In a way, maybe the rich man from this morning's reading would have appreciated an assessment tool like this to help him on his path

At the moment, all the rich man could think of was what he was going to lose, but as Ragan Sutterfield notes: "We gain more than what we let go of because we become participants in that wider reality of God's great family."

The way of Jesus is an invitation to participation

The way of Jesus as expressed here at St. Bart's is an invitation to participation

And the fruits of our offerings are the transformation of our minds, the consolations of our spirits, the care provided to our neighbors, the relationship with our Creator

Thanks be to God.