

"We have met the Rich Young Man..."

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Ps. 22;

Mark 10:17-31.

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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Back in the 1970's the Comic Strip Pogo was very popular. The swamp critters had much to say to each other and to us. Their commentary on society and politics was the highlight of the comics page. The now-famous line: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." was actually used by cartoonist Walt Kelly to illustrate a poster for Earth Day - a reminder to all of us of how the way in which we live can wreak havoc on the world around us.

Self-awareness is a key condition for making a positive difference for ourselves and for others.

In today's story from Mark's Gospel, Jesus meets an enthusiastic, ardent, well-motivated man. He is self-assured, perhaps even self-made. Whether he is self-aware or not is yet to be seen.

Right from the start we see he is someone special. He kneels at Jesus' feet. This is probably not typical of those who encountered Jesus back then. He is deferential, reverent even.

He comes to Jesus with the "million dollar question": "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Built into this question is his recognition that Jesus is a good teacher, perhaps even a great one. Who knows: the man may even believe he is the Son of God!

He also knows that "eternal life" belongs to God. The writer of Revelation in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter verse 7 says it very plainly: "Salvation belongs to God." It is God's to give because God "owns" it.

The man also believes there are things one must do in order to receive the gift of eternal life. So far, so good.

In response to his question, Jesus immediately corrects him and sends the focus to God the Father. It is as though Jesus is enacting Deuteronomy 6, the Great Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is ONE! And you shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

Goodness belongs to God alone. God, in his goodness, has given us the commandments as a way of ordering our lives in response to the blessings we have been given by our God.

After listing some of these commandments, all of which - by the way - point to the importance of right relationships with others, the man quickly responds that he has kept them all since he was very young. But, commandment-keeping and right relating to others are very different things. The first is along the lines of ticking things off a "to-do" list. The second is about awareness of the world around us.

And here is where an "A-Ha" moment occurs. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. This is the only place in Scripture where such a statement is made. We hear about the disciple whom Jesus loved - usually referring to John. But no such thing is said by Jesus about anyone else, anywhere else in the Bible. Interesting.

And the Greek word used here for "love" is "agape". This is the kind of love that goes soul-to-soul. It is the "for God so loved the World..."

kind of love. This puts the encounter on a different level as Jesus gets ready to practice some "tough love."

He says, "Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor and you will be better able to see where your true treasure lies. It lies in heaven. Then come and follow me."

Here is where the problems start - problems of interpretation and problems of application, because it sounds like Jesus is promoting "works-righteousness" over grace.

As we move closer to Reformation Sunday at the end of October, we remember our Reformed heritage and the historic objection of our religious forebears to "Works-Righteousness". Works-Righteousness is the idea that there are works we must do in order to be righteous and unless we do enough of them, we won't get to heaven.

The Reformers' rallying cry was "Grace Alone! Faith Alone! Scripture Alone!"

Grace alone! This means that salvation is the free gift of God given to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God in Christ has made salvation possible for us and offers it freely to all.

Faith alone! As opposed to something we must work to achieve, faith alone means that God's salvation is secured in our hearts by faith in Christ and the salvation "work" he has done.

Scripture alone! This means that God's holy word in the Old and New Testaments are our sole source of authority for what it means to lead a life that is pleasing to God and is part of God's kingdom. No pope's decree, no council's ruling, no General Assembly's decision is binding on

the heart and soul of the believer if it stands in any way contrary to the revealed word of God in Scripture.

So, we have long opposed the idea that we can buy or work our way into heaven. And yet, it is still the basic way in which we live. We success-minded, results-oriented, goal-setting Western Christians can see ourselves in the profile of this man who kneels before the Master.

He, like us, is addicted to "stuff". He, like us, is challenged by Jesus to be a compassionate, generous saint. He, like us, knows there is no way that he can possibly give up "the good life" in order to put his total faith in the one who promises abundant, everlasting life.

That would just be too scary. It would make him too vulnerable. He'd have to trust in a way he'd never trusted before.

He can't do it and neither can we. And that's why we need this Jesus who speaks these words to him and to us and calls us to put our trust in the God who makes all things possible.

Because, rather than giving what sounds like a "work" for the man to do in order to be "righteous", Jesus is doing the exact opposite. The sheer immensity of the task, the very impossibility of it undercuts the use of our works for any saving purpose except for the proclamation of the saving work of God in Christ who has already secured our past, present and our future close to the heart of God.

Can we hear Jesus talking to us, looking at us, loving us, and challenging us to be his disciples? Can we hear him inviting us to loosen our grip - ever so slightly perhaps - on the things that we think provide our security and our peace? Can we hear his voice in the cries of our

sisters and brothers in need across the globe who would be happy with the scraps off of most of our tables?

As we struggle with what it means to follow Jesus and to be "good people" let us not be deaf to the voice of Jesus in Scripture, deaf to the voices of those who cry out day and night for deliverance, deaf to the inner voice of the Spirit calling us to be less worried about whether God loves us and more concerned about showing that love through our compassion and generosity toward sisters and brothers in need.

Amen.