

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
October 11, 2009
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 23)**

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

As you folks may know, we are just finishing Parents' Weekend at the Academies. The weather was not exactly very cooperative on Thursday and Friday, but I will observe that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. Perhaps instead of quoting Matthew here, I should cite Feste from Shakespeare's Twelfth Night: “The rain it raineth every day.” Whoever you are quoting, it was pretty damp at the start of this weekend.

All of us read the scriptures through the filter of our experiences. I have to say I always pay attention when there is anything in the reading about teaching or teachers. In today's reading, I am struck by the fact that the young man addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher.” I am not Jesus of course, but people usually don't address me that way. If you think about it, people usually don't address Jesus that way either. It seems like most of the time, the people asking Jesus questions are trying to trap him.

The reading last week had the Pharisees asking a question on divorce and remarriage hoping to get Jesus in trouble with Herod. Herod was married to his brother Phillip's ex. You can take a second to consider this whole thing played out on Dr. Phil instead of in the Gospel of Mark. You also might not want to go there. It is a sensitive and politically charged issue for Jesus, and that is a fact.

My point is that when the Pharisees ask Jesus a question, it is an attempt to trap him, and they are not starting from “Good Teacher.” They have an agenda, and it is not a salvation agenda or a “kingdom of God” agenda either. The young man in today's Gospel seems very sincere and is asking an honest question. He asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

This seems like an appropriate enough question. If a student went up to a youth minister on a college campus and asked “What do I have to do to be saved?” it would not seem so remarkable. The youth minister is there for that very purpose.

I find it interesting that Jesus goes to the commandments in his response. Here is Jesus who has ushered in the era of grace and seems to preach about faith a lot, and here he is talking obedience to the law.

Let's look for a second at the specific commandments Jesus asks about. There are commandments at the beginning of the list that deal with relationship with God. That is where you get the blasphemy and idolatry prohibitions. The ones at the end deal with the relationships with people. It is the commandments at the end that Jesus focuses on with the young man. He asks him about adultery and stealing. He asks him about honoring his mother and father.

The young man replies that he has kept these since his youth. People do stupid things, and there is no age requirement for stealing. You can do it at 10 and you can do it at 90. Some things like dishonoring your mother and father do seem more characteristic of people in their teens. It is Parents' Weekend at the Academies after all, and I have had plenty of opportunity to think about all this. At any rate the man replies "I'm good – well, since I was a teenager at least." And Jesus lets it go. My guess is that really this guy has been a faithful person who has obeyed the law. There may have been some teen rebellion back in the day, but that is in the past now.

So Jesus tells him to sell his stuff and come back, and the man can't do it. The thing separating this man from God is his stuff. I would like to point out that when Jesus called the fishermen – Andrew, Simon, James and John, he did not tell them to sell their fishing boats. Unloading your possessions is not a general commandment in order to be a disciple. I will observe that there was willingness on their part to drop their nets and respond to the call to discipleship. Maybe they were already where this man needs to be.

This letting go of things is where the young man stumbles. He has lived a clean and virtuous life. It sounds like he has been a good son. He has his earthly inheritance all worked out.

In 2002 or so, my brother called me and said he thought he might be having a midlife crisis and might need me to talk him out of doing something he was about to do. I decided to sit down, and asked what was going on. He said that he was thinking about selling everything he had except books and art. He wanted to put those in storage and go to Thailand as a missionary. I asked if his wife was on board and supported this. He said yes, and I encouraged him to do it. He and his family were in Thailand for six years and came back last year. Sometimes stuff is what keeps us from answering God's call, but it isn't always.

Now this sermon is not about how we all need to sell our stuff and become missionaries. This sermon is about responding to God's call. If we have a burden that separates us from God's will and keeps us from serving Him, that is what we need to attend to. It was not a "one size fits all" piece of advice, and you have maybe noticed that one size never really does fit all.

What are some of the things that keep us from serving God? George Thurogood was asked once in an interview about the influences on his music. He replied "Drugs, sex, and rock & roll – What else is there?" I want to be very careful about pointing out specks in my brother's eye, when I have logs in my own, but it does seem as if drugs, sex and rock & roll might be things that keep some people from responding to God's call.

There are two big questions I want you to think about. The first question involves God's call. How is God calling you to discipleship?

This is a question I have brought up before, and it is one we never really completely answer. It is something we figure out over time and come to appreciate. Every now and then it is a little more obvious. God speaks to Saul out of the clouds. The Bishop makes a phone call and says he has a plan for your life. Most of the time though it seems like we figure it out in pieces.

All of us have gifts for ministry and ways we are called to exercise those gifts. It is not just the young man in the Gospel who is called. Each of us is called as well.

The second question has to do with the barriers in our life. What are the things we can't give up that keep us from responding to God?

This is really the question and the thought I want to leave you with today. Are there things in our lives that separate us from God and keep us from answering His call?

What can we do to get rid of those things?

Now this sermon has been about duty so far really. It has been about call and what we have to be willing to give up. This is a responsibility, and no one wants to be told to do something that might be hard or seem impossible. I want to leave you with grace and hope as the last thought.

When the disciples hear this teaching the Gospel reading says "They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'"

For God all things are possible.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen