

There is no getting around the fact that this is a hard teaching. The letter to the Hebrews says that the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. Piercing until it divides soul from spirits, joints from marrow. And this is one of those occasions when the scriptures do just that. Jesus comes right at us where we are most sensitive: our wallets.

Let's not go right there- yet.

Now, you all know that I have recently been a candidate for bishop in two different dioceses. I credit part of why I was not successful in those two elections to my commitment to one idea which is this: Jesus wants us to be free. Jesus wants us to be free to follow him wholeheartedly. Jesus wants us to be free from possession by spirits, whether evil spirits or the spirits of anxiety and scarcity that dominate our age. Jesus wants the church to be free.

Free of the burdens and mistakes of the past. Free to live into its future without fear and in new ways. Jesus wants churches, local churches like ours, to be agents of radical freedom, helping our parishioners to get free and to remain free of all that holds them captive.

Now, Many believe that the church should be a means of control. Controlling passions, controlling behaviors, controlling your choices, and directing your actions. This belief in control is more pronounced the more you look at those committed to church governance: there is a real spiritual commitment in the church to control rather than freedom.

But, I don't believe that participation in the church is or should be about control. I believe that Jesus wants us to be free. And I don't mind losing an episcopal election or two if that is the reason- or one of the reasons. So here is my question for all of us gathered: what is it that keeps you from being free?

Our answers are likely different for each one of us. Still, many of us are likely captive to the same familiar spirits and anxieties of this age, one of which is the desire for money and the pursuit of wealth. I have seldom met anyone who does not have a disordered relationship with money and or wealth.

For many of us, we are driven by anxiety about scarcity. For some of us, that anxiety is well earned from having lived in poverty at one point or another in our lives. Some of us may have “lost it all” once or twice in our lives and have had to rebuild our financial capacity. Some of us, and I include myself here, have experienced homelessness- whether from sudden tragedy, or storms, or political violence, and we are afraid of experiencing these things again.

Fear is a different and other spirit that can enslave us. But that's another sermon. But, In the face of that fear of scarcity, that fear of poverty, many of us dedicate ourselves to chasing after wealth.

When this rich young ruler walks onto the scene in this chapter of the gospel of Mark, it doesn't take long for Jesus, the great doctor of souls, to diagnose his spiritual illness. There is a bit of jab and parry at the start of the conversation- “Good teacher,” he says. Jesus responds: “why do you call me

good.” Then, Jesus asks: “Have you kept the commandments,” “Yes, all of them.” And Jesus begins to list them. The rich young man responds- “yes all of them.” “Even the one about fraud?” “Yes, all of them.”

Of course, for those of us who know our scriptures well, the big tell is that there is no commandment against fraud. And Jesus knew that, too. So why did he ask this man about fraud? Did the rich young ruler *really* know the commandments?

And why fraud? Was that a particular vice that this rich young ruler suffered from? We may never know. Regardless, he pronounces his diagnosis: “You are possessed by wealth.” The prescription: “Go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, then you can follow me”

We know how this prescription hit this unknown man because the scripture tells us: “When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

Now, how would you, how would any of us respond if Jesus had challenged us in this same way? How would any of you respond if I said that to you? I think we may not be friends anymore.

Here is the measure of the depth of our possession by money and wealth: we don't even have the intellectual freedom to imagine that things might be different, even better if we did give most everything away. All we can imagine is how much we would give up.

Scripture is almost uniformly clear that money corrupts people's souls. It tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil. It reminds us that money and power are linked to the detriment of human souls. Scripture shows us through character study how the desire for and pursuit of wealth destroys families and nations, and kills prophets. We know, we know that we can't take wealth with us when we die, and we are told- and we may know intellectually - that money is not a sign of intelligence or a respecter of dignity.

Some of us think that having money will lead to control of our destinies. But, truth is it is the money that is the thing frequently in charge of our destinies. And money isn't even a real thing. It has no agency of its own. It has no will.

And yet, the love of money enslaves many of us. I include myself in this group.

So, what would it take to be free?

Now, I'm sure that the vestry would like me to remind us all that this is of course, the beginning of stewardship season, but it will not free you to give your money to the church- but it would help us. That's not what Jesus is talking about, either. No, true liberty is a spiritual state. A spiritual state offered to us through the freedom of following Jesus—the freedom of the Gospel.

I do not think freedom from the pursuit of wealth is the kind of freedom that many of us will enjoy on this side of eternity, but there are practices that we can engage with to loosen our captivity to money, fear, anxiety, and greed. The most obvious of these is proactive generosity.

True generosity is giving of ourselves, our wealth, and our resources without expectation of return or reward. Very few of us achieve that level of selflessness. Instead, we sometimes practice generosity, which is an extension of our desire for control—a generosity in aid of recognition.

These are still better than no generosity, and they are on the way to true generosity, but it's not the goal.

Prayer helps, too, of course. Because, prayer can lead us to detachment, and detachment is on the way to freedom.

It's not uncommon in our prayers to imagine ourselves encountering Jesus. But this episode, this is one of those stories that makes me uneager to meet Jesus in prayer. Because I wonder how he would diagnose me. What challenging message might he extend to me? Do you ever wonder what he might say to you? I just know it would be astute. It would be cutting. And it would be challenging. But, like the rich young ruler, I don't know what I'd do then.

In fact, we don't even know what happened to him. We only know that he left confounded. We don't know if he took Jesus's prescription to sell all he had, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus. We only know that he walked away from his encounter confounded.

He, like us, might just have been too attached to who he was to give it up for who we might become. I feel for him, and I wish I knew what happened next.

My colleague and poet Steve Garnass Holmes wrote this about that:

“What you lack is lack.
You have so much, you don't need eternal life,
don't need God.
To receive eternal life you have to be empty enough.
You have to sell everything, give it all away.
You have to live in radical trust.
Sometimes trust is deepest when it's all there is.
Be mindful of what you cling to,
and what you would gladly spend to find blessing,
what you would drop to be free.
And drop it.
Practice trust and generosity.
Practice letting go and giving away.
When you've given away what you can,
what you're left with is what can't be taken from you:
infinite life.”

Jesus, give us the courage to follow you. Give us the courage to be free. *Amen*