

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Proper 23 Year B  
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I often speak to you about Jesus' temperament. Sometimes it's to point out when he looks upon others with love and compassion, as something we are to model, but sometimes it's when Jesus appears to be cranky, or irritable, or impatient, or even rude to the people around him. Speaking of his temperament or mood in the moment helps us understand Jesus as a real person, the humanly Jesus who felt all the same emotions we do, and who succumbs to even the emotions we may consider to be the lesser emotions, which at least in us, may be based from fear or a sense of scarcity.

However, even the expression of the more negative responses of Jesus speak most clearly to us of Jesus' divinity, for in those emotions is rooted the holy passion Jesus has in teaching the people he loves about the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. Any frustration he may express could easily be attributed to the fact that for Jesus, the kingdom is here, through his presence, and no one is noticing. And for people to begin to notice and live into a different way of being, Jesus is aware that a total reorientation must happen, and for that, he needs to get people's attention. So we often have the challenging and somewhat confusing Jesus addresses us in the scriptures.

In the past three weeks, Jesus has been hitting us hard with one very important element of the kingdom of God: social and economic justice. Last week, Jesus spoke to us about the nature of holy and just relationships in Jesus' response to the Pharisee's question on divorce; last week; we also heard the directive to pay attention to and find the wisdom in the people who are marginalized and considered to be of little or no value in his conversation about welcoming this little children, which was certainly a shock to his audience and can be to us as well; while today his focus is on wealth, which has implications for each one of us, regardless of where we see ourselves on the poor-rich spectrum. For the message Jesus offers us is that our personal value is not based on how much, or how little, we have accumulated or how secure, or insecure, we may feel based on our financial resources. Jesus' conversation with the young rich man instructs us on how we are to use the wealth we may find ourselves possessing.

Now one of the interesting things Jesus does is to answer a question with another question. Jesus is an expert at re-framing questions. Have you noticed in the past few weeks, he has never answered a direct question with a direct and concise answer, but rather reworks the question to talk about what really is important in the kingdom, rather than what we in our humanly smallness can imagine. This can recall in us that beautiful prayer that we prayed last week: Jesus is always ready to give us that we can neither ask for nor imagine.

Last week, Jesus was asked if it was legal for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus didn't answer that question, but rather, through his references to his scriptures, shared with us the nature of all our relationships, which God desires for us. Jesus then goes on, in his directive to welcome the children, to answer a question that the disciples didn't even know to ask – how does our behavior toward the marginalized reflect our understanding that all people are God's beloved. This question wasn't even on their radar.

And today, a young man, who happened to be rich, who was a strict observer of the Torah law, wanted to know how he could inherit eternal life. Jesus doesn't answer that question, but rather tells him what he needs to do to have treasure in heaven. Not exactly the answer to the young man's original question.

The topic about how to obtain or inherit eternal life is a question to many Christians about what they need to do here on earth in order to ensure they will go to heaven, which implies that life in heaven, after death, is a reward for an accumulation of a certain number of good deeds done during your lifetime, or for faithful and moral living.

We don't know if the young man thought something was missing in his life that he was earnestly searching for, even after he's lived his life in strict and faithful obedience to the laws, perhaps he wants to know how to fill in the missing piece; or we may wonder whether he believes he has earned the right to heaven by his faithful obedience to the law, and therefore is expecting Jesus' affirmation of his straight pathway to heaven and is shocked when that doesn't come.

Now interestingly, the Jewish understanding of eternal life at that time was not a reward of having the pearly gates opened for them and eternal rest or peace offered to them, or streets laden with gold available to them through all eternity. It was rather a transformed earth, the life of the age to come here and now, a restored kingdom of God here in their current life.

So from the Jewish perspective we can understand how Jesus say the transformed world beginning with his appearance, and was saying to his friends, it's here, it's now, and it requires you to change, your thoughts and questions to be re-oriented, you to be transformed, for the world to be transformed. God has entered the world in a brand new way, and now it's all up to you.

And in order to bring about that transformation within their understanding and hearts, Jesus needed to reframe the rich man's question, from have I done enough to receive this reward to how can I live my life so there is treasure for others, in heaven on earth, here and now.

So there are two important concepts for us to talk about today: how is God reframing our questions, so we are at least on point and asking what the questions

that matter to God; and what must we do to bring treasure into the heaven, here on earth.

My sense is that God is always reframing our questions, and this is how our transformation happens. I imagine most of us have had the experience when we prayed for something we thought we really wanted, and it didn't happen. But then sometime later, we looked back and said to ourselves, "Oh, that's why that didn't happen, something even better than we could have imagined had happened instead." Some of the transformation in ourselves happens when God sees the bigger picture than we can even imagine. Sadly, some people, when prayers don't appear to be answered, give up on God, and therefore give up on the perspective that can be gained, by waiting and seeing what God may be up to in our lives.

Sometimes the transformation happens, as it did with the disciples when Jesus spoke to them about welcoming the children, asking for them a question they hadn't even known to be asking. I often chuckle when God does that to me. It seems whenever I pray that someone else will change, become more charitable, more responsive, or whatever I think would be a good thing for them, and for me – God ends up changing me and my heart! Each time I am reminded I didn't even know the right question to be asking, and God provided me the question and the answer!

And sometimes God reframes our questions, or shares with us the question to be asking, by allowing us to only see the answer, and to invite us to discern what it is that we should be asking, what deep within us is rising up that we should pay attention to.

My most recent experience of this is that recently, often times I think there's some alien who has taken over my body when these foreign words come out of my mouth, when I say things like, "I can't wait to go hiking again". My pull to be out in nature, to be climbing over a rocky path, or to be hiking up Horse Killer Road everyday, is a complete mystery to me, but I trust the invitation and figure God has reframed or introduced me some question that has been hiding my heart and is answering it for me.

Each time God reframes our questions or plants the question or answer in our hearts, we are transformed. Each time we are transformed, so is our world, and the Kingdom of God, which Jesus ushered in, becomes nearer to fruition.

So I invite you to think about the questions your heart is asking of God this day? What are you talking with God about? What are you wondering about? What do you want from God?

And then think about how you and God might reframe that question to get at what really matters to God? Perhaps it matters to you that you find the next best job for yourself. But perhaps it matters more to God that your discernment involves the criteria of how best may you use all of your life to bring God's goodness into the

world? Or perhaps God is really asking you a question you had not yet pondered, and is inviting you to a place of healing that will allow you to be changed at depth, and take that more whole place into the world. Sometimes God invites us into a conversation we didn't even know we should be having. That happened to me in the desert on an open day of reflection and prayer. God and I had a conversation, which I hadn't even known was on my radar.

The bottom line in today's message is that to enter God's kingdom here and now, which is the same as storing up treasure in God's heaven, certainly meant the loss of everything that Jesus' followers thought to be important before. That may be true for us too. Following Jesus, storing up treasure in heaven, may mean that all that you care about, all that you own and attach value to, may radically change. It may feel like you are being asked to give up your life, as you know it, to be a follower of the way. The cost of discipleship may be very high for you. It was for me, and in a very honest moment, when I counted the cost of following Jesus into my ordained priesthood, I really wondered if I wanted to make such a radical change in my life. I wasn't sure if I could give up what felt like everything when I wasn't sure what would be given back to me in return. I wasn't looking for what might be promised to me after death – I was wondering what my life here on earth might become.

I asked this question to my spiritual director – “Would God forgive me if I chose not to do this, if I were to decide the costs are too high?”, not unlike the saddened young rich man in our story.

Luckily, my spiritual director reframed my question and said to me, “Barbara, you're asking the wrong question.” Of course God will forgive you, we believe in a forgiving God. But the real question you want to be asking is, “Will you forgive yourself?”

Upon reflection, I decided the cost of regret, of knowingly not becoming all which God had asked of me, or purposely holding back a part of my heart and soul from Jesus was a cost I could never bear.

Yes, discipleship costs us each and every day, if we're doing it right. It may cost us our possessions, our comfort, our ease of relationships, our certainty of belief, our sanity at times (!), and it will break our hearts, but today we are called to get rid of all the stuff that holds us back from following Jesus, and give it away to build the kingdom, here and now.

What is implied in our scripture reading today, but not explicitly stated, is that Jesus doesn't ask us to give away all that we have, so we end up with nothing. Jesus says give away all that stuff, so I can give you everything, so I can give you the kingdom, so I can give you an abundant life, one which you could neither ask for nor imagine.

Jesus is inviting you into this abundant life. Won't you follow Jesus and join me in committing yourself to giving all that we can away, so we are free to receive the kingdom of God, here and now.