

Prepared Sermon on Sunday 13 October 2024 9Pentecost 21, Year B [28]
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Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. (Mark 10:21-22)

We don't want to lose precious and valuable belongings. Especially when we lose our precious things unexpectedly or against our will, we grieve.

Let's take a moment to reflect on three things in our lives that we hold dear. These could be people or possessions. (Pause)

How did you go? I won't ask you what's on your list; instead, I'll give you some common examples so you can relate your thoughts to this exercise.

One of the most common things we would not like to lose is our loved ones. Especially if we lose our spouse (or partner), our parents, our brothers, sisters, or kids in an unexpected accident, we suffer a lot as they are not replaceable. The next thing is that something has tremendous sentimental value, such as your wedding ring, old photos of your late grandparents, etc. The third thing is the things you earned through your effort—the amount of money in your bank accounts, including your cards, or your position in your business. Losing them means you have gone back to the scratch. No! We don't want that!

So, we take measures to prevent such losses, strengthen safety awareness among our family, and tighten security. But what is it about loss that unsettles our minds? Let's name them: sadness, disappointment, resentment, confusion, and guilt. These are all emotions we would rather not entertain. We strive for a sense of security and peace of mind, and these emotions are the antithesis of that. We prefer to live in peace and comfort, free from these unsettling feelings.

A rich young man was so confident. When he asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Verse 17)

He was very sure that Jesus would grant him eternal life, and he was telling Jesus how good he was. 'Look, I have always obeyed the Ten Commandments. Aren't I so perfect?' This young man appears to be a 'big spoiled kid.' 'Being rich, he could satisfy his desire for anything by using his wealth. Since his childhood, I assume, he had never been threatened to lose everything he earned. He was sure he could 'buy' eternal life because he paid more than enough and believed he did everything in the commandments correctly.

Given the young man's arrogance, Jesus's response was a direct command—to give up all his possessions and then follow him. The young man's shock at this unexpected advice from the good teacher, Jesus, was profound, underlining the impact of Jesus's words.

There is a difference between Owning and Possessing. Owning means that we are allowed to have and keep our belongings. On the other hand, possession denies other people access to our belongings. Here's an example: Two young brothers are fighting over the video game device. The older boy enthusiastically plays without stopping. The younger boy has been begging his brother to let him have his turn and play. The big boy ignores his brother and does not even look at him. "Hay Jack!" the younger one raised his voice. 'I wanna play this game! You've done enough, and I should have a go! 'Give me the controller!' He started to cry as his brother continued to ignore him. 'That's not fair!' The little one shows his anger. Then the older one replies, 'Listen. This is MY game. Mum and Dad gave this to me on my birthday! You aren't allowed to touch it!' Then the fight goes on,...

If you are the parent, what do you say to them? You would stop them fighting first, then listen to both of them before telling the older boy to let his brother play, wouldn't you?

The older boy thought he possessed this game device because it was very special to him. His parents gave him the device as a birthday present, so he is the owner of the machine. But it is unnecessary to say that he has the right to deny his brother access to the machine.

The rich young man's attitude is very similar to this example. I imagine he never allowed others to access, borrow, or use anything that belonged to him. He believed that eternal life meant for him to continue possessing all he had forever. If someone comes to him in desperate need of money or items, he will not give anything because all he possesses are untouchable for others. Jesus, knowing what this young man was like, challenged him. He also expected this young man to be disappointed at his command. He was grieving not for his emotions but for his strong resentment with Jesus' teaching of giving.

This episode reminds me of a Japanese story by the famous twentieth-century novelist R. Akutagawa (Pronounced as AK-TA-GAWA). This is not a Christian story, but I relate it to Jesus' teachings. The story is called 'The Spider's Thread,' and it goes like this: At the bottom of a deep shaft, hundreds of people were crying out for help. Suddenly, a thin string came down above like a spider's thread.

It came down in front of a man's face. Not wasting his time, the man quickly held the line, which was strong enough for him to climb upward. He was so excited, as he thought he was saved. He climbed up and up, and the mouth of the shaft was getting closer to him. Then he looked down and found many others holding the same line, climbing up after him. He got furious and yelled at them. 'Hey, this is mine! Don't touch it!' At that moment, the thin line was cut, and he fell to the bottom of the shaft.

This man, too was possessive. He believed the thin line only belonged to him. He refused others to touch it. The consequence of his action is ironic. The hope that he saw was wiped away by his ultimate selfishness.

Jesus did not reject the rich and selfish man. He gave him vital homework. Like him, sometimes, we need to learn how to be free from the fear of being dispossessed. Eternal life is given to those of us who live for others by sharing the love of God instead of holding it to ourselves alone. This is exactly what Jesus did to us by his sacrifice on the Cross.