

PENTECOST 21B – 10/14/18

Watch What You Ask For

(Mark 10:17-31)

We've probably all heard the expression: "Watch what you ask for." Sometimes it's phrased like this: "Be careful what you wish for." And in both cases, the answer or response is what? Right. "You just may get it."

Three men were out walking on a beach one afternoon when they came across an old lamp. The first man picked it up and began to rub it and out popped a genie. The genie said, "I am here to grant each of you one wish."

The first man didn't hesitate. He said, "I want a million dollars." And POOF, instantly a million dollars appeared on the sand before him.

The second man spoke up next. "I want a mansion here on the beach." And POOF, a beautiful mansion appeared right before his eyes on the bluff overlooking the beach and the genie handed him the keys.

This got the third guy really thinking about what *he* wanted to ask for. Finally he said, "I want you to make me irresistible to women." And POOF... the genie turned him into a large box of chocolates!

Watch what you ask for... You just may get it.

As we heard in today's gospel, a man once ran up and knelt before Jesus and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And at this point, I want to make the observation... *Watch what you ask for!*

Now it's important to note here that this man was not trying to "test" Jesus, like the situation that was described for us in last week's gospel. Or as was the case in that exchange between Jesus and the lawyer leading up to the telling of the Parable of the Good Samaritan that I recalled for you at that time.

On the contrary, *this* man seems utterly sincere and respectful. How do we know this? First, because he anxiously ran up to Jesus and *knelt* before him; a sure sign of respect. And second, because he addressed Jesus as "Good Teacher," *another* sign of respect.

However, Jesus responds by asking, "Why do you call me good?" Then quickly adds, "No one is good but God alone." In other words, as they say, "Flattery will get you nowhere." And that's certainly the case here as well.

But notice Jesus doesn't dismiss the man, or his question, out of hand, as we might have expected perhaps. Instead he accepts it as a legitimate inquiry; a worthwhile request even. And the man himself as deserving of a response.

And here is, once again, where I feel like calling out to the man: Watch what you ask for. You asked the question. Are you ready now for the answer?

Sensing that this man is apparently not only sincere, but also serious, and that he has probably already wrestled with this question on his own

for some time, Jesus of course decides to engage him in a conversation. “You know the commandments,” Jesus says before going on to recite several of them.

“Teacher,” the man anxiously interrupts, “I have kept all these since my youth.” In other words, I’ve been trying to do everything the law demands of me; truly I *have*.

And there is no reason for us to doubt him. Once again, this is not someone intent on tricking Jesus or tripping him up; not at all. He simply wants an answer to a question that has apparently been troubling him. And for some time it would appear. After all he’s applied himself faithfully for many years now and done everything the law seems to require of him. But, even so, he’s still troubled; his nagging question still goes unanswered, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Notice though how Jesus reacts. Jesus looks at him and what? Mark tells us that Jesus *loved* him. In other words, Jesus perceives the seriousness and the sincerity which have prompted this man’s question. And so now Jesus wants to give him an equally serious and sincere reply. Jesus obviously cares for him and, *because* he cares for him, Jesus also wants the man to understand exactly what’s at stake here.

And to drive home his point, Jesus says to the man, “You lack one thing.” It’s as if Jesus is saying, “I know. You’ve done everything the law asks of you. But there’s something missing. Something more. Something you’ve missed. So here’s what I want you to do. Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and then come follow me.”

When he heard this, we're told, the man was shocked – literally *shocked*. Not merely surprised or even disappointed, but *shocked* – as if he never would have anticipated this kind of response from Jesus in a million years. And he went away grieving, Mark tells us. Why? Because the man had many possessions...

Here we have this serious and sincere individual who had done everything humanly possible to lead a good and faithful life. And maybe all he was asking for here was a little affirmation and recognition from Jesus. Maybe all he was looking for was for Jesus to say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You’ve done everything God has asked and required of you. Go now in peace with the knowledge that you will, indeed, inherit the kingdom.”

But *no!* What he hears from Jesus, instead, what he’s *shocked* to hear, is: You lack one more thing. Go sell everything, give it to the poor, and come follow me. This poor guy never saw it coming, did he?

The expression “Watch what you ask for, you just may get it” certainly applies here. The man asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus told him... And it was not at all what he was expecting..

But here’s the thing. It’s easy for us to focus on the man’s wealth and to see *that* as the problem here; the issue. Too easy, in fact. But wealth or possessions are *not* the problem here. They are not the real issue.

The fact that the man had many possessions did not, in and of itself, disqualify him from inheriting the kingdom or enjoying eternal life. The Bible is *full* of rich people. And not all of them are bad or evil. In fact, many of them are the exact opposite.

For example, the patriarchs in the Old Testament, people like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all wealthy men with large flocks and herds. But also remember what God promised Abraham. I have blessed you to *be a blessing....* to others.

And in the New Testament there was a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, you may recall, in whose unused tomb Jesus' lifeless body was laid to rest after his death on the cross. Then there was Barnabas who sold some land he owned and set the proceeds of that sale at the apostles' feet to be used for their ministry. And Lydia, the wealthy merchant-woman, who was a dealer in purple cloth, who responded to Paul's preaching, was baptized, and then, more than likely, supported his mission financially as well.

No. The possession of wealth is not *at all* the problem or the issue. But maybe how you feel about that wealth, how important it is to you, how attached to it you allow yourself to become, and how it can then stand in the way of trusting and following Jesus – maybe *these* things are the problem and the issue. And maybe this is precisely what Jesus sensed about the man in today's gospel.

He had it all, didn't he? And he did everything humanly possible to lead a good and religious life. But it wasn't enough, was it? There was still something missing. You lack one thing, said Jesus.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *All You've Ever Wanted Is Not Enough*," makes this observation: "Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense

that we have figured out how to live so our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through.”

In other words, blessed to *be* a blessing, just as God once promised Abraham. Because wealth and possessions, are just “things.” It would be a mistake to become too attached to them.

Many years ago, during the 19th century, a tourist from America visited a famous Polish rabbi named Hofetz Chaim. This tourist was surprised to discover that this renowned and influential scholar and religious leader lived in one simple room filled with books, plus a simple bed, table, and bench. “Rabbi,” asked the tourist, “where is your furniture? Where are the rest of your possessions?” And the wise old rabbi responded, “Where are yours?”

“Mine?” asked the puzzled American. “Why, I’m only a visitor here. I’m just passing through.” The rabbi looked at him, smiled, and said, “You’re only a visitor? You’re only passing through? Well so am I. So am I.”

On the other hand, also back in the 19th century, there lived another man whose wealth *still* defies description. Now, for the sake of comparison, the wealthiest man in the world currently is Jeff Bezos – the founder, chairman and CEO of Amazon – whose wealth is estimated to be approximately 142 billion dollars. Pretty lofty sum, to be sure! But *this* man’s wealth, adjusted for inflation, was nearly three times that! Some 400 billion dollars! His name was John D. Rockefeller.

Rockefeller, of course, was the founder of the Standard Oil Company which, at its peak, controlled 90% of all the oil in the United States,

making him the wealthiest man in America and the richest person in modern history.

Early on in life he decided to earn money and he totally devoted himself to that pursuit. By the age of 33, he had earned his first million dollars. At age 43, he controlled the biggest company in the world. And at 53, he was the richest man on earth, and the world's first billionaire.

But then he developed a sickness call "alopecia," where all the hair on his head fell off, and his eyelashes and eyebrows disappeared. In addition, his entire body was racked with pain and it wasted away and shrunk down until he looked like a mummy.

Here his weekly income at this point was a million dollars. We're talking a million dollars each and every week! And he could buy literally anything he wanted – including, of course, food. But he could only digest milk and crackers at this point. He could not sleep, would not smile, and nothing in life – despite having the world at his fingertips – meant anything at all to him.

His personal, highly skilled physicians – the very best doctors money could buy – all predicted that he would die within a year. And, at this point, all the leading newspapers throughout the country had already written his obituary in advance.

But those sleepless nights set him to thinking. And as death approached, he awoke one morning with the vague remembrances of a dream. He could barely recall it, but knew it had something to do with not being able to take his immense wealth with him into the next world. Money, he suddenly and belatedly realized, was *not* everything. The man who

could control the business world suddenly realized that he was not in control of his very own life. He was left with a choice.

So the next morning he called his attorneys, accountants, and managers together and announced that he wanted to channel his assets to hospitals, research and mission work. He had become a new man. His immense wealth was now dedicated to helping others; especially those less fortunate.

In 1884 he provided major funding for Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary for African-American women, which later became Spelman College. He gave \$80 million to the University of Chicago, turning a small Baptist college into a world-class institution. He became one of the first great benefactors of medical science creating the Rockefeller Foundation in 1913 and gave nearly \$250 million to its efforts, which focused on public health, medical training, and the arts. It endowed the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health, the first of its kind. And, a lifelong Baptist, he gave to various churches and denominations of every kind, both across the entire country and indeed the world.

But perhaps the most amazing part of Rockefeller's story is that the moment he began to give back a significant portion of all that he had earned, his body's chemistry was altered so significantly that he soon got better. He began to sleep well, eat normally, and once again enjoy life. You could say that it was only when he began to give away his wealth that he began to truly live life to the fullest. And the man, whose doctors predicted his death when he was 53, ended up living to the ripe old age of 98!

The rich man in today's gospel went away grieving because he could not bring himself to part with his wealth. The rich man, John D. Rockefeller, did the exact opposite. He began to finally and fully embrace life when he *could* bring himself to part with his wealth.

But it wasn't really all about the money, was it? You see, John D. Rockefeller remained an immensely wealthy man even *after* he began to give much of it away. The difference was that the money no longer controlled *him*. He controlled *it*. Whereas the rich man in today's gospel apparently could not bring himself to make that choice; to make that change.

Rockefeller was able to trust God and let go. While the man in Mark's story could not.

But here's the thing. In the final analysis, there is nothing at all that we can *ever* do to earn the kingdom of God. Not even by giving away our wealth. All Jesus asks of us is to trust him and to follow him, and to not let the attachments of this world, whatever they may be, stand in the way of doing that.

And perhaps the saddest thing of all is that the rich man in today's gospel actually had it right when he asked his question. "What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?" Because the answer is nothing. Inheritances are *given*, not earned. And so it is with eternal life. It's a gift freely given. All we have to do to receive it is trust and follow.

Amen.

