

Twenty-First Sunday of Pentecost – 14 October 2018

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man...asked him, "...what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "You know the commandments," Jesus replied...."Teacher; I have kept all these since my youth." "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."

"Then come, follow me."

What's important in your life?

I'm asking you the question, yet before I can set these words down on paper to ask you I have to ask it of myself: – What's important to me in my life – because all of us are asked that – what is important to each one of us in our own lives? Because when you get down to it – you can brush aside all the pomp, all the liturgy, all the candles, and hymns, the friendly greetings from friends and neighbors, all the good works that we do, even the sermons we hear and even the ones we write – the question we are all interested in having answered – what is really important to each one of us in our own lives.

Recently I was involved in a prison ministry and a "retreat" or a "walk" that we put on for sixteen inmates at Tucker Prison. This is the Kairos retreat for which many of you prayed and supported. It began with a get together Thursday evening at which we met the sixteen men who would be the participants. Each one was assigned a "sponsor" whose role was to greet the participant, talk with him, welcome him, and give him a preview of the weekend. In truth it's not unlike what we do when we greet visitors to St. Luke's – all of us welcome visitors and some of us have a special and specific ministry to greet our guests, to make them feel welcome, to answer questions.

I've been involved in this prison ministry for a number of years yet I'm always surprised at what I learn – and what I learn is some variation, some answer, some strong hint, in answer to the question of what is important to a man.

This year the inmate for whom I was the sponsor was a young man in his mid-twenties. That evening he was concerned about his mother from whom he had not heard from for three months even though she lives close to the prison in one of the towns of East Arkansas. He did not speak of a father in his life but indirectly of a succession of his mother's boyfriends. Indeed, several times he said he had been raised by "D.H.S." – Department of Human Services – apparently foster homes, juvenile detention facilities and now prison. Now he is assigned to

the hoe squad. Reporting to Tucker earlier in the afternoon we had seen the hoe squad returning from its work: Men in dirty white uniforms sitting dejectedly on large carts pulled by a tractor all the while escorted by armed guards on horses. It could have been a scene from a movie from 50 years ago – or even a hundred. He lives in a noisy open barracks with each man assigned his own iron cot. There is always noise he says. He described some of fellow inmate's assigned cots near him as "crackheads."

Yet as he talked he shared what was his hope in life, what was important to him.

I would like to get married, he said. I would like to have a family. I want three kids – two boys and a girl, he said. He had given it a lot of thought. I suspect he had had a lot of time to think about it. With a hoe in your hands, chopping weeds, day after day, every day being just like every other day, I suspect you would have a lot of time to think about it.

The young man who approached Jesus that day had taken a lot of time to think about what was important to him. And what was important to him was controlling life – controlling existence – all of it. And at the moment he pretty much had everything under control, he thought. He was rich, he was young, he had good health – he had it all figured out – he was in control of almost everything in life. You can tell he was sort of a "take charge" guy. And he thought now "luck", "fate", maybe "providence," had put this strange man who in fact seemed to control everything right there in front of him. Now all I have to do was go up and ask him. And so he did.

And he blew it.

He was a man of great talent and ability. Jesus sensed that immediately. Jesus realized that and offered him the opportunity to become an important part of the building of the Kingdom of God. Even as the world measures these things of power and importance – to have countless churches named after him, to have feast days in his memory, candles burning forever in his honor and glory – and what did he do? He walked away. We don't even know his name.

We do know – we do remember – "When he heard this...he went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

And, of course, we have the same opportunity – including the opportunity I suppose to mess it up as well. I guess that is what this thing called "free will" is all about.

Maybe something not so as dramatic as an encounter with the living Christ as this unknown man was blessed to have.

But maybe it's in the ordinary – seemingly ordinary - times of our life when we could have extended a kindness to a stranger, but we didn't.

Maybe in the ordinary – seemingly ordinary – times of our life when we could have shared with a friend how important God’s love has been to us in our own lives, but we didn’t.

A good friend - knowing that I was going to be absent from church on a recent Sunday – asked “Did you write a check to the church for the Sunday you missed?” Well, I hadn’t until he mentioned it. We are in the time of the year that we consider what will be our support for our church for the coming year. I’m asking myself what will I pledge. Will it be the “minimum” that I can pledge without getting comments such as ‘he’s about as tight as Dick’s hat band.’ Maybe that’s not the right way to look at it. How have I been blessed in life? – and I have – and how much can I give since I truly want to follow Him?

And I guess that’s the big question – and maybe the answer.

How can I follow Him? How can I follow Him so that I know that my life has meaning and purpose?

Because maybe that is the answer: it is in following Christ that we find meaning and purpose in life. It is in following Christ that we mirror Christ in our lives – and it is in that mirroring of Christ – the giving of our love to others as Christ gives his love to us – that we find purpose, meaning - and joy – in our lives.

It’s surprising to me sometimes how much a person will share with you if you just listen.

I was surprised how much the young man at Tucker shared with me – a complete stranger. A complete stranger who has practically nothing in common with him.

And yet he did.

Maybe it is the dreadfulness of that place.

Maybe it is the hopelessness of that place. A place so without hope that he is like a man bound and held captive in a dark ship going God know where – whose version of writing of a note asking for help and putting it in a bottle tossed out into the sea is talking with a complete stranger.

I wish I could tell you the young man participated in the program and there was a great turnaround in his life.

He did not return to the program the next morning – he dropped out.

I pray for him.

And I pray that there will be someone who will go to say,

“You are loved, you are not forgotten.”

Amen.

Richard Robertson