

Matthew 19:16-30

Generosity: The Key to Happiness

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This month our sermon theme is stewardship. During the season of Thanksgiving it makes sense to focus on stewardship. One of the great things about Thanksgiving is that it is, at its core, a religious holiday. We get fussed up about the food, but for the most part this is a simple ritual. We gather in circles of family and friends and we eat a meal that commemorates the founders of this nation, religious pilgrims who took a risky journey so that they could practice their faith. This commitment to their faith came at a cost. Not everyone survived the Mayflower crossing or that first hard New England winter. But when they got to the first harvest they thanked God for surviving. They thanked God for life.

Christians believe that life begins with a gift from God. God who owns everything gives it to us to enjoy for our lifetimes. Good stewards pause to remember the Source of these gifts. Good stewards consider how to make sure that we use what we have been given to do our part for those at God's table who have much less, or who are disadvantaged in some ways that makes it hard for them to even get to the tables of life's bounty.

The reason I really enjoy the holiday we celebrate this week is because it has the capacity to settle you. It reminds us that whatever table we sit at – in our homes, at a relative's home, in a restaurant, on a highway we are seated at God's table. The One sitting at the head of all of these tables is God.

Once we get past worrying about the food, the family dynamics, the children or the grandparents, or the friends who endear or upset – when we get past all of that we may even wonder what will make this a good holiday. What rituals will serve to remind us that we are thankful? What words or symbols will really connect us to one another? Will you go around the table and ask everyone to mention one thing for which they are

grateful? Will you say a special prayer? Will you tell stories? Will you grieve someone missing from the table this year? Will you hold hands? Will you sing the doxology? Will you stop and consider this year's special blessings and take a moment when you pause to reflect? Those moments always take you to holy ground.

It is one of those conversations that we find here in Matthew 19. A man has cornered Jesus for a heart to heart. This is one of those conversations that culminate and define our lives. I want to start by saying that this man is a good man and righteous in all the ways that matter, but he senses that something is missing and he wants to know what it is.

Let's look at the story and see what the Bible is saying to us today.

IN THE FIRST PLACE Jesus tells us to live with integrity. When the man approaches Jesus to ask what one thing he must do to find the most in life, to find life's meaning Jesus stops him in his tracks. "Don't seek one good thing," Christ says. "There is no magic deed you need to do. Life does not work like that. If you want to be truly happy you need to have integrity." Start with the basics - the Ten Commandments. Don't steal from others. Don't take someone's life- or do things that kill another person. Don't lie. Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus says happiness is not a mystery. It starts with being a good person.

Prevention Magazine is the health periodical that dishes out common sense health information. They had an article online about the four things that make people happy –

1. People who have important friendships are happy. People with strong fabric of friendships are happier than those who don't.
2. People who express gratitude regularly are happier.
3. People who show random acts of kindness - 5 good deeds a week.
4. People who re-appraise their lives periodically are happier.

Prevention has put a modern spin on Christ's message. Tend to the basics of life and you will be satisfied.

IN THE SECOND PLACE – Be generous with what you have been given.

Apparently, there is a new arena of economic inquiry called "Happiness Economics" which studies the connection between money and satisfaction. These economists have found a correlation between people's happiness and the amount of money that they have - the correlation holds until they earn \$75,000 a year. At that point all bets are off. We all need money to feel our basic costs are accounted for, but beyond that having more money does not make you happier.

Scholars at the Universities of Virginia, British Columbia and Harvard did a study in 2011 that examined the connection between money and happiness. They discovered that people with more money reported being more happy, but "when asked about how happy they were at the moment, money made no difference at all. It had no effect."

Jesus listens to the man and then tells him that you cannot talk about faith without walking the walk of faith. Jesus says if you have followed all of the commandments that is a good start but the elephant in this room is your money because you are a rich man. If you want to be truly happy you should sell all of your possessions and give the money to the poor; then you will be more satisfied than you can imagine. You cannot follow all the commandments and then fail to use all his money in the service of your faith. You cannot divide your resources in one room and your religion in another. God has been so generous with us. We cannot be in a relationship with God – not a truly open relationship, if we are tight-fisted with what we have been given.

There is an old story about a customer service call for Butter Ball turkey. A woman called inquiring about a turkey that had been in her freezer for 23 years. The company rep. told her that it might be safe if the freezer was kept below zero the whole time. But the rep cautioned the woman that even if it were safe the flavor probably had deteriorated. Butter ball did not recommend eating the turkey. At that point the caller replied- "That's what we thought we'll probably just give it to the church".

The man in our story was very close to finding life's deepest rewards. Like many of us, he knew how to avoid the temptations of stealing and lying. He knew how to honor his parents. He knew how to consider the needs of others and treat his neighbors graciously. He knew how to pray and even speak earnestly with Christ. But he had a lot of money and it was weighing him down. His possessions were taking a toll on him. Jesus says, "If you wish to be whole, go and sell your possessions and you will have treasure in heaven. Give your stuff away and your soul will be free. The Bible says that economics is a spiritual issue.

The man in our story was ambivalent and he went away grieving because he had many possessions. Aren't we all? The Bible says we need to use our resources to lift up those who have less. Sometimes that means we live more simply so that other people can simply live. The Bible says that God has given you 100% of what you have. You get to keep 90% of it, and all God asks of us is 10%.

Finally, we have choices but no one can have it all.

Then Jesus says it will be harder for a camel to get through a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. People have wrestled with this one line in the Bible for centuries. Some scholars speculate that there was a gate in the wall around Jerusalem for travelers who arrived late at night and it was low so that enemy troops could not enter in the wee hours, but no camel could get through it without contorting itself. Others think that word for rope and the word for camel are close in Hebrew. The translation must be rope because you might get a rope through the eye of a needle. It would be hard but not impossible. I am not sure if these clarifications help.

As we search high and low for any other interpretation we strive to miss Christ's point. Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters; you cannot serve God and mammon." Until you are prepared to give everything away your possessions own you. Being generous is not just good for other people; it is freeing for us. That is the curse of our time; we want to have it all. We have told ourselves we can, if only we run fast enough, and think quickly enough we can outsmart life.

I tried a new yoga studio last summer. It was highly recommended online and in a magazine I read. It seemed crowded when I went to check it out, and everyone was very enthusiastic at the desk where you sign in. After a tour I went online to find a class that fit my schedule, but I noticed something unusual. At the end of each section of the website they had the tagline, high five and Namaste. I wondered about that. I think a high five is appropriate to celebrate a championship, or other accomplishment. I have taken enough yoga classes to know that they end with this prayerful reverent bow of deep peace where people say Namaste. But I cannot imagine putting high five with Namaste in the same sentence. It does not work. The high five is all about winning the games of life. The Namaste is a Buddhist concept that has to do with release of any sense of competition. The raucous high five upsets the peace of the Namaste, and the Namaste drags the high five down

We live in a world where people believe you can have both high fives and Namaste's. The man in Matthew wanted to keep all his possessions and also find the peace that passes human understanding. Jesus says you have to decide. Life involves trade-offs.

Let us pray...God of all things our hearts are full as we consider how thankful we are for the gifts of creation, and all the things you have showered on us. Your open-handed generosity startles and surprises us. It is hard to know how to respond. Help us to be all that you need us to be. Help us to live with integrity. Help us to use our resources to make this world more just, more loving and more kind. Open our tight fists and grant us generous hearts that we may truly live in your image.