

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

23 E. Airy Street | Norristown PA 19401 | (610) 272-4092



NOT IF, BUT WHEN

The Rev. Andrew F. Kline

Text of a Sermon preached the 20th Sunday after Pentecost

October 10, 2021

AMOS 5:6-7,10-15 | PSALM 90:12-17

HEBREWS 4:12-16 | MARK 10:17-31

Our prayer this morning must be: “Teach us, O Lord, to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.”

We need this prayer on those days when we have a big decision to make. We need this prayer on those days when the spinning world suddenly stops, and we realize we are arriving someplace. We realize we are at the beginning or end of a relationship. The beginning or end of a job. The beginning or end of a season of life.

Often a birthday, or an annual holiday signals this kind of reflection in us. We look both backward and forward and think about what has changed, about what has remained the same. Indeed, an illness, a birth, a death - not even our own - is an invitation to bow the head and bend the knee. We feel the need, we pray the prayer:

“Teach us, O Lord, to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.”

The story of the rich young man, found in all the gospels, is also a story that sends us to our knees. It is challenging, uncompromising, riveting. It is like big boulder in the middle of our path that we just can't walk around. We have to climb over it. St. Mark thinks this story is so important it is the last teaching he gives on what it means to be a disciple as he foretells his death a third time and prepares to enter Jerusalem for the last time.

The call to sell all we might have, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus is so radical we try to add things to the story to make sense of it. We need more backstory. We need to suppose that our suspect is young, perhaps impulsive, with an agenda, full of himself, not able to see himself clearly, comfortable, confident, cocky, oh and yes, privileged.

Look at him, trying to get on Jesus' good side. When Jesus asks him to give it all away, we look into his face and try to understand why he looked so disappointed, why he walked away. Is this a moral defect in him, or the spiritual challenge for all of us. Would any of us just jump up and go do it? Well, yes, says St. Luke, who gives us the story of Zacheus. Well, maybe, says St. Matthew, who softens the blow by having Jesus say, “if you would be perfect, then go, sell all you have, and come follow me.”

How many of us would have settled for not being perfect, wanting to keep all our stuff, and still wanting to think of ourselves as doing the right thing, following Jesus. I'm raising my hand right now. I can't stand this story. And not because it is impossible. In the end, Jesus tells his disciples, it is impossible to have many possessions, many attachments, and be free of them to follow God. It's just a fact. Camel here. Eye of needle here. Impossible going from here to there. Whew. With God nothing is impossible.

But we are still not off the hook. The powerful moment in Mark's gospel, the moment that makes it different, and to my mind more helpful, than the other versions, is what Mark saw that the others didn't see. He looked into the young man's face. Then he looked into Jesus' face. And he saw that Jesus loved him. He saw the encounter that each of us long for. He saw the encounter that is the only answer to the question: "How shall I inherit eternal life." Or to the prayer: "Teach me how to number my days."

The mystery of the Christian life is that God loves us so much, that he sends his only Son to draw near to us, to come alongside us, as our friend, our companion, our advocate, and God asks us to walk the way of the cross with him. The cross is more than a symbol. It is more than a place where sin, suffering and death meet. It is the place where Jesus abandoned himself to God's will, trusted himself to divine providence. You will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

God's will is a mystery. When we are going about our life, making our daily decisions, coming to our daily turns in the road, we are often, so often, forgetting to say our prayers, forgetting to ask God to teach us wisdom by putting our lives in the proper perspective.

By the mouth of the prophets, God tells us that he requires more than keeping the commandments. Amos slaps us in the face and says God demands "justice at the gate." That means social, economic, interpersonal fairness that everyone can see, that doesn't happen behind closed doors.

"Seek good and not evil, that you may live;

and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.

Hate evil and love good,

and establish justice in the gate."

There are no shortcuts. No alternative to eventually, giving everyone their due. Giving it all away. There are no shortcuts to simply having the kind of faith that approaches Jesus, with a full heart or a timid heart, it doesn't matter, and asks him, "what should I do here?" What makes sense with all the gifts and opportunities you have given me? How, right now, shall I live.

St. Francis heard this passage and gave it all away. Leo Tolstoy heard this passage and walked away from his fortune. For all I know, Warren Buffet was listening to this passage when he decided to give his fortune away.

It is not a matter of “if” I am to give it all away, but “when.”

As I meditate more and more on this passage, I have been asking God for an experience of abandoning myself to his providence, or trusting myself to his will for me. And it is my prayer for you.

Nothing can change us until we have the experience of falling into the hands of the living God, who, as Hebrews tells us, is a consuming fire. His word is “living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

What do you need to know today? Which way should you take?

Run to him. Let him look into your eyes. Ask him your question.

What should I do Lord? Let his answer pierce your heart. It comes from the throne of grace. And by that grace, may you be able to do what he says. May we experience the risk, the thrill - the necessity - of abandoning ourselves to God's providence.

It is not a matter of “if” we are to give it all away – but “when.”

Where the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.