

Sermon by Christopher Girata

Mark 10:17-27
(Proper 23 – Year B)
15 October 2006

In 1941, a boy named Millard was born into a poor family in central Alabama. As a child of the south, Millard loved his family, the outdoors, and good food. On Sunday, he would walk to his family's church across the red-clay earth and up the old wooden steps.

Grounded in traditional southern values, Millard's church was a big part of his childhood and was a place where he always felt comfortable. When Millard entered college, he found himself in a new environment of competition and temptation that slowly drew him into a life of impulse and materialism.

After graduating from law school, Millard began a marketing firm near his home town and married his long-time girlfriend. He worked very hard in that marketing firm and by the time he was only 29 years old, he became a millionaire. He was set to live the dream life – fancy cars, flashy clothes and fabulous vacations. He was on top of the world and his life seemed like it would only go up from there. But just as he was excelling professionally, Millard's health began to decline and his marriage began to suffer. As his personal life fell apart, he threw himself more deeply into his work, for his work was the only thing he knew he could control. But his *work* and *wealth* could not keep him from falling into a personal crisis, a crisis from which he would not quickly recover. He began questioning his life's direction, not knowing where he wanted to go. Millard began to realize that there is *more to life than just money*. He realized that there is *more to life than just material wealth*.

For as much wealth as he had, Millard reached a point in his life where money could not get him what he wanted – money could not make him happy. The young man in our gospel lesson has reached a similar crossroads, sharing Millard's *crisis of direction*. The rich young man knows there is more to life than money; he is searching for a *new direction*. In our story, the young man approaches Jesus with a great sense of urgency, running up to him and saying, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus tells the young man that there is just one thing he must do, just one step he must take toward eternal life – he must "sell what [he] own[s] and give the money to the poor." Without a single word, the young man's face drops and he walks away sadly. He did *not*

take that final step. His eagerness, of just a few moments earlier, has turned sour. He thought he was close; he thought he had done everything he was supposed to do.

Our gospel lesson can easily be read as a condemnation of wealth. However, money is not the enemy here. Even in poverty, we can still be consumed by the material world, still held captive by the material world. Our wealth, in and of itself, does not keep us away from God. *Our attachment to that wealth keeps us detached from God.* That detachment, that captivity, that obsession with the material can keep us from the freedom of eternal life with God. Jesus knows that the young man's material obsession is holding him back. His *attachments* are keeping him from committing to Jesus' teachings – from being a true disciple – and Jesus calls him out. Jesus names this young man's worldly attachment – money – and tells him that the only way to inherit eternal life is to let his money go.

That same attachment is keeping us disconnected from God. We have the potential for a *deep* relationship with God, a free relationship with God; if only we could see that we are attached to the world – that *we are stuck*. In effect, Jesus is telling us, you and me, that we are stuck, trapped, bound to the world we do not need and held back from the eternal life we *do* need.

Getting free from our trap is easy. However, *knowing* that we are trapped is very difficult. It is likely that most of us have heard of monkey traps. Monkey traps are simple coconuts, filled with cooked rice and anchored to a tree. Monkeys smell the food, slip their hands inside, and grab a fistful of rice. There is only one problem – with a fist full of rice, the monkeys are not able to free their hands. The monkeys are stuck. The monkey simply wants the good food; in fact, he believes he *needs* that food. Even as the hunter approaches, the monkey holds fast to the rice, ultimately leading to his capture. If only the monkey knew that the short-term benefit of lunch did not compare to the long-term benefit of freedom in the wild. If only the monkey knew that the food was not as rich as the freedom he sacrificed.

How many of us regularly feel stuck in our own lives? It's very easy for us to be stuck in many different ways, to be stuck and not know how to get out. Our desire for material wealth—for *stuff*—often leads us down slippery paths. Like a hunter setting a trap, our world tempts us in many ways, and we often find ourselves trapped in detrimental situations with no apparent way to escape.

Millard and the rich young man in our gospel are trapped. They are bound to this world by their wealth. They know they are stuck, but do not know how to free themselves. All they have is a sense of the reality of something greater than material wealth. Jesus identifies their material wealth as their trap, and then he tells them how to get free. Jesus tells them that to be freed of their trap, they simply have to give all their money away. That grand act of charity would allow them to slip their hands out of their coconut traps. The loss of their material wealth would gain them the freedom of eternal life with God.

Stories like the ones we have heard today can often seem overwhelming when we seek to apply their lessons to our own lives. How attached are you to that which you believe you need, and how often do those things get in the way of doing what you know is right, of doing what you know would draw you closer to God? We work so hard to build our lives. Most of us even live intentionally for the benefit of others, whether they are our families, friends, or even strangers! You may be grappling with the passage in disbelief, saying to yourself, "I'm a decent person. I love my family and friends and I work hard so I can provide a safe and comfortable life for them. What's wrong with that?" - Are we being told to give all that up?

Friends, *what we are hearing in Jesus' message is not a condemnation - Jesus' message is a call to redirection.* Jesus is not tempting us with the promise of eternal life, a promise of freedom with God, only for that promise to be snatched away with a command too difficult for us to follow. Jesus is not asking us for more than we can give. Indeed he is promising us eternal life for free! Eternal life is offered to us with no strings attached. God offers us the choice. We can choose to love God completely, not only when loving is convenient. We can choose to detach ourselves from the things in our lives that are only temporary. Our whole world is temporary. God's world is eternal. We are being challenged to look beyond our fleeting lives to the promise of eternal life with God.

We left Millard in a state of crisis. Yet even in the midst of his crisis, Millard was able to re-evaluate his life. He was able to take a step back and see that his life's direction was not what he wanted his life to be. He decided to take charge of what was truly important to him, his family and his long-lost faith. He reconciled with his wife and re-committed himself to Christ. After his pledge of faith to live out a more Christian life, Millard and his family made a dramatic decision - they decided to sell everything they had and give all their money to the poor. Millard was reinvigorated for a new purpose. He believed that this new vision and new direction for his life would bring him closer to Christ and closer

to eternal life with God. So what happened to Millard's fortune? He used all his material wealth to create Habitat for Humanity, one of the best models of Christian social responsibility around. Millard Fuller transformed his wealth from a troublesome road block to a joyful tool of God's good work in the world. He was no longer attached to his money; now he was attached to God.

When we acknowledge our lives and all we develop in them as temporary, we discover eternal life with God. Millard Fuller was too attached to his money, but we may be attached to any number of other things. It is our task to examine and re-direct our lives – our task to choose eternal life. Our world will always tempt us with good things, and we may even have the opportunity to get some of those good things. But, when those things—that *stuff*—stands in the way of our eternal life, our eternal freedom with God, remember our gospel story and release them. Let those things go, pull free from the trap, and love God absolutely.

Amen.