

Text: Hebrews 4: 12-16; Mark 10:17-31

Title: Stewardship: Discipleship or Patronage?

Date: October 11, 2009

If I say the word patronage, what's the first thing that comes to mind? What comes to my mind, is that term "patron of the Arts" those people who financially support the arts- enabling the symphony, the painters, sculptors, dancers etc to do what they do. And thank God for them- just look how much the Joscyln Museum adds to our community- even if you never set foot through its doors! I had never thought to apply patronage to churches- churches after all are supported by the people who go there and are involved in the life of the church. That, and I have been lucky, every church I have been part of was supported by people who cared for the church, and by those who were operating out of their own egos.

The first inkling I had that this is not always the case was with a conversation with an interim minister. He used the term "reputational leadership." I didn't know what that meant, so he told this story: He was serving an interim in a small rural town. Since he was not local, he was staying at the church manse. The manse was a perfectly nice house, sitting on the same lot as the church. The odd thing was, was that it sat sideways from what you might expect, the front door did not face the street, the side of the house did. Oh well, there is no accounting for taste...

Anyway he was reading the session records and other church documents to get a feel for the congregation, when he ran across the original plans of the church- with the manse sitting with the front door facing the street. Someone had circled the house and written NO! and initialed it. When he asked who the initials belonged to, he was told that they belonged to one of the richer guys in town, who only wrote one check to the church a year, but that one check made up the difference between the projected budget and what they actually raised. This guy was routinely considered the savior of the church. When he looked into it further, he found that in all the years this guy had been doing this, he never wrote a check for more than 2 grand or so! Over there year there were others who actually gave more- but this was the guy everyone bowed and scraped to. "That's reputational leadership- people deferred to him because they thought he was the church's savior." Wow- that's what patronage in the church looks like!

The reason I bring this up is that we know that patronage was not unusual in first century synagogues. Luke 7 tells us that there were those people who financially supported church to the point that people asked Jesus favors for them. (to be fair, Luke 7 refers to the Roman centurion who built the synagogue, who sounds like an all-around good guy- and the favor people are asking of Jesus is that his servant be healed.) We normally think of our Mark passage as the story about a rich man who refused and offer to follow Jesus. That never made any sense to me. Do we really think that this guy, who goes out of their way to seek Jesus out, is likely to say, "No thanks, I've got other things to do." When Jesus invites him to follow him? For that matter, Jesus' initial response to him seems a bit harsh- No one is Good unless it is God- that seems a bit in your face to me. Clearly I was missing something .

On the other hand, I think that there are enough clues to suggest that our rich man was the patron of the local synagogue- and that his underlying issue was his priorities- and the prestige that comes with being rich. So he comes to Jesus asking what he has to do to inherit eternal life. On the surface, that's not such an odd question- but it's not the question that Jesus answers. The question that Jesus answers is, "How do I live my life according to eternal priorities?". To a religious Jew, this is a no-brainer- live according to the commandments- keeping one's priorities fixed on the right relationship between God and others. So Jesus points him to the commandments – and our guy expresses frustration. "But I'm already doing that, what do you want from me? What do I have to do?" You can almost see the gears working in Jesus' mind, recognizing that this guy is trying to do the right thing, yet he feels trapped by everything that goes with being rich- wanting more, but not willing to give up what he has to get something better. We are told that Jesus loved him and suggested that he turn his back on that which does not satisfy- dump the possessions and follow me. And this is the one thing that he can't do.

Because there is more at stake here than mere possessions. According to the patronage system that the prophets were always railing against was the notion that God blesses those He favors with wealth and long life. So if I have more money than you, then God must love me more. And I will demonstrate how much more God loves me than you by sponsoring elaborate sacrifices and public displays of piety. (you can see

why the OT prophets went off- God looks at the heart and this kind of attitude actually takes us away from God's priorities. If I am endowing the local synagogue so that people will think of be a blessed- then it's not really for God or God's people, is it? You can't listen for the voice of God if you are focusing on applause, can you?

That's Jesus' point about the camel going the eye of the needle- it can't be done. If we are going to follow God than we are going to have to set aside our preconceived ideas of what makes us fulfilled. Of course, that is nothing new. Discipleship by definition implies a turning away from earthly priorities to embracing God's priorities. And because we are sinful people- that is impossible for us to do. It takes divine intervention- and that means a reliance on God's grace.

The disciples get part of it- but not all of it. Hey Jesus – we've left everything behind to follow you- but if they thought Jesus wan going to pat them on the back- they were going to be disappointed. Jesus cut Peter off mid sentence to point out that everyone who gives something up for the sake of the Gospel will be repaid. Our passage ends on a warning note- that he first shall be last and the last first. If what we give is geared to raising our own prestige in the community- that is not a priority that is going to get us closer to God. On the other hand , if we adopt God's priorities we see that wealth is morally neutral- what matters is how we use it and how those uses reflect God's priorities. It is one of those truisms that often the most generous of people are those who do not have a lot to share- yet share for the sheer joy that sharing gives. God's priorities are reward in themselves. That was the lesson that our rich man did not learn- and is the reason he left Jesus with a broken heart.

The obvious question is how do we know what God's priorities are? Lord knows that there are enough groups out there that say God is on our side- give to our candidate, give to our program, just give- trust us. Trust us! At the risk of sounding cynical- the surest way for me not to trust anyone is for them to tell me to trust them!

Hebrews of course gives us the answer- if you want to search out God's priorities, than search out God's word. Not just Scripture- not just words printed on paper- but what happens when we invite the Holy Spirit into the process. We understand that the Word of God happens somewhere between the pages of Scripture and our own hearts- that the Spirit transforms mere words to God's law upon our hearts.

Scripture- the Holy Spirit empowered experience of Scripture- always points us to Jesus. In a very real sense we've come full circle. We are that Rich Man, surrounded by our wealth, our security and our toys asking how do we live according to God's priorities. Jesus pointed the Rich man towards God's law in Scripture, but in a larger sense we are called to encounter Scripture and through the Spirit, encounter Jesus himself.

We are in the middle of our annual stewardship drive- that period of time that determines the resources that we have to bear to accomplish what we sense God wants us to do. I am no economist – but even I can say that the economy is not out of the woods yet. The temptation is always there, to give to the church out of our largesse, out of our surplus, essentially out of our entertainment budget- those monies we set aside to blow. That's not too far off the attitude of the Rich Man- and that brought him only disappointment. However, if we link stewardship to an experience of Jesus Christ as mediated by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, that is an entirely different proposition. That is the road of discipleship on which we are embarked.

Our hymn is Take My Life- let this be our prayer.