

## **Year B-Pentecost21-2018-Propser23b-The Eleventh Commandment**

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October 14, 2018

Mark 10:17-31

### **The Eleventh Commandment**

The rich man who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life and then walked away grieving when Jesus told him to sell all that he owned is a warning to all of us, rich or poor. Jesus' added warning that it "is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" only makes the warning all the more dire. Paul strengthens the warning further when he tells Timothy that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil," Bucking these warnings is our formation from earliest childhood that money is both good and necessary and more of it is always better than less.

Money is not an individual matter; money is a system. It has to be if it's going to be a medium of exchange. As a system, money gains power over all of us who use it. This is a power that easily distorts the moral conscience. In this regard, it is telling that in the commandments Jesus lists to the rich man, all are from the Ten Commandments except "You shall not defraud." Perhaps this is an eleventh commandment, or perhaps it is a version of: "You shall not covet." The more power money gains over us, the more likely it is that we will defraud others in order to get more of it. Indeed, most rich people in Palestine gained their wealth at the expense of poor farmers during hard times.

The thought of the French thinker René Girard demonstrates that economic systems, like other interlocking social systems, are part of an all-pervasive system generated by what Girard called "mimetic desire." That is, when one person wants something, other people are more apt to want it too. The more somebody wants something, the more other people want it, not because of the intrinsic value but because everyone now thinks it is valuable. Each person imitates the other in liking the same thing and they rival each other to get it. The interlocking of shared desires permeates society, making society a more tightly knotted system than the economical one. In other words, memetic desire, wanting what we think the other has or wants, is more at the heart of what makes us tick than economics.

To put it another way, we imitate each other rather than imitate God as revealed by Jesus. This is why worshiping God, acknowledging God as our Creator, praising God, bowing the knee to the God that transcends all humans is so important. It gives us an alternative to making our neighbor and what we think our neighbor has, into a God, an idol, "the other" who keeps us in bondage because we can never keep up and must always strive. This is what the tenth commandment not to covet is all about. It attempts to reduce the power of mimetic desire over us

by saying “don’t desire what you think the other has.” It will make your life more difficult, distort your capacity to love evenly and with righteousness, draw you into envy, rivalry and violence and separate you from community. So, desire instead, what God alone can give you.

Jesus’ eleventh commandment deepens the tenth: you shall not steal what you covet because you have the social and economic power to do so. To ground all of this in the text and to demonstrate the tenderness of Jesus, I want to read this section of Mark to you again. As we tune in, Jesus has just recited the Ten Commandments and added one; the one Abbot Andrew calls “the 11<sup>th</sup> Commandment.”

The man said to Jesus, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth,” “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” That’s the part I find so moving. Jesus knows that he thinks he has kept all the commandments, that he is sincere and earnest. But the man doesn’t see how his wealth was gained through an economic system that privileged him and defrauded others. His not seeing this is the reason Jesus added his eleventh commandment which said, “You shall not defraud.” Jesus wants to free him from the bondage he is under so he says, “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.” Jesus asks him to give his money back to the poor from whence it came. Then he will be a free man and ready to follow Jesus. The text goes on, “When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” He does not recognize his own bondage.

I would like to add a thought here. When we first discover the way our wealth is often acquired through another’s poverty and this is set into the systems of this world to which we are beholden, do we too grieve and walk away? It is a hard pill to swallow. I think grieving here is an appropriate response. It takes time for the huge truth of this to soak in and for us to decide that we want to let go of some or all of our wealth and discover the joy of sharing it. St. Francis of Assisi would be a good example of one who did this quite literally. Maybe at a later date this man came back to Jesus ready to change his life and become a Jesus’ follower.

Back to Abbot Andrew who writes, “Coveting is not a vice only for the rich. I am among those who are seriously offended by what some preachers call ‘the Prosperity Gospel,’ which seems to contradict Jesus’ words to the Rich Man.”

The “Prosperity Gospel” is the belief that if you sign up as a Christian, God will reward you with prosperity and you will move from being poor to being rich. So become a Christian and get rich. The preachers who preach this luxuriate in expensive lifestyles, thereby showing their people how being their kind of Christian makes you rich. After all, you have to model it.

Again, here is how it works mimetically. Through mimetic desire other people tell me and show me what to desire. In the case of the “Prosperity Gospel,” rich people model “the good life” to

the poor and the poor want it. This is why, after Jesus told the disciples how difficult it was for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God, they exclaim, “Then who can be saved?” They thought being rich was evidence of being blessed and therefore hoped Jesus, when he became the new Jewish Caesar, would make them all rich. Their wealth would save them. The economic system, then, is fueled by the deeper system of mimetic desire wherein everybody wants to be like the rich landlords who break the tenth and eleventh commandments.

Jesus, then, is not inviting one person who happens to be rich to change; Jesus is asking all of us to change in such a way that the system is changed. The omnipresence of mimetic desire makes it clear that, important as it is to reform economic structures, it isn't enough to do the job on its own. Our hearts need a makeover individually and collectively. This is why the Gospel tries to change hearts, mine included.

Our hearts need a makeover individually and collectively. That's why we come to worship, pray, praise God, and sing hymns that ground us in God. This is why we give our money to support our growth aspirations and listen to words we hope God's Spirit will use to change us. Like the man who ran up to Jesus just as Jesus was leaving on a journey, fell on his knees before Jesus and asked “what must I do to participate in the life of God,” we too come just in time. And while we may grieve at what Jesus, in his exquisite tenderness tells us, I pray we will be able to do what he asks so that we too will know the joy of a deeper participation in his Kingdom now here and still coming in its fullness. Amen.