

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Mark 10:17-31

October 15, 2006 – Pentecost 19 [B]

2005 was one of the most DESTRUCTIVE hurricane seasons on record. In addition to Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Wilma also caused tremendous loss of life and property. So earlier this year when meteorologists predicted that 2006 would also have a HIGH number of storms – many people were understandably APPREHENSIVE. But **so far this year there have been far FEWER storms than expected**. And many people have wondered: WHY?

The answer – in part – has to do with something called **EL NINO**. El Nino is a weather phenomenon that SOMETIMES develops in the Pacific Ocean off the coasts of Central and South America. The water WARMS UP more than usual due to a drop in westerly winds – and **the warming of such a large area of water creates conditions that have FAR-REACHING consequences**.

For instance, when El Nino develops, weather in the United States is MUCH DIFFERENT: winters are usually STORMIER in the West; WETTER and MILDER in the Southeast; WARMER in the Northeast; but most importantly for us – **El Nino seems to HINDER the formation of hurricanes in the Atlantic**. And just a few months ago – researchers discovered that El Nino had UNEXPECTEDLY APPEARED this year – and because of the TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE of this one area in the Pacific Ocean – we've had a lot fewer storms and a much calmer hurricane season.

If conditions in ONE CORNER of the world can affect weather GLOBALLY – I invite you this morning to think for a moment about INFLUENCES – and the things that influence US. We live in a world in which **MANY “forces” exert POWERFUL INFLUENCE upon us** – and not all of them have to do with the weather. Among these “influences” are:

- **SEX** [which is PERVASIVE through music, TV, and other media]
- **VIOLENCE** [are we really surprised at the number of school shootings when the average child views 20,000 murders on TV before age 16?]
- **CONSUMERISM** [we're taught that happiness is attained by getting and having THINGS]

There are LOTS of “influences” exerting pressure on us every day – **but of all the “influences” out there, there may be NONE MORE POWERFUL than MONEY**. NO ONE is EXEMPT from its influence; ALL of us are affected by it.

You may have heard about the woman who called the local Methodist preacher to baptize her CAT.

The minister thought it was ridiculous – so he tried to “put the woman off” by telling her he was just TOO BUSY. He suggested that she try the Baptist or the Presbyterian ministers.

In a little while, the woman called back and said: *I called the Baptist preacher and the Presbyterian preacher – but they said they were too busy too.* She went on: *I just don't know WHAT I'm going to do. I just HAVE to have my cat baptized – and I'll give \$10,000 to the church that does it!* The preacher said: *Ma'am, why didn't you tell me your cat was a Methodist?!* **THAT'S the influence of MONEY.**

The Scripture for this morning – it's about the influence of money. Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem [where he will die on a cross]. On the way, he is approached by a man who asks: *Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*

This man asks a GOOD question. Too often we treat the Bible as the “BIG BOOK OF ANSWERS”; but the Bible is NOT so much a book with “all the answers” as it is a book that asks ALL THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. And here – we find one of life's GREAT questions: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*

Now – if someone were to stop you and ask: *How do I get eternal life?* – chances are we'd say something like FAITH or REPENTANCE or something else. But **Jesus responds by referring the man to the Commandments** [*What does the Law say?*]. Jesus understood that the Commandments are all about how we are to relate to God and how we relate to others – and Jesus points this man to the Law because LIFE AS GOD INTENDS US TO LIVE IT IS ALWAYS tied to the place we give God and the way we TREAT others. Do we REVERE God and SERVE God with our lives? Do we treat people with RESPECT and COMPASSION? Jesus points this man to the Law because **ETERNAL LIFE has a lot to do with learning to live in loving and caring relationships with God and one another.**

And so when Jesus asks the man: *How are you when it comes to keeping the Commandments – living in “community”?* And the man answers: *NO PROBLEM! Since my youth, I've kept them all!*

It's at THIS moment that Jesus tells the man: *You lack only one thing – GO and SELL all your possessions, GIVE the money to the poor, and COME FOLLOW me – and THEN you will have eternal life!* And **the man is so SHOCKED by Jesus' words that he turns and WALKS AWAY.**

It's the ONLY recorded incident [in MK] where Jesus invites someone to join him – and the person REFUSES – and we're told it's because *"he had many possessions"*.

In the time of Jesus – WEALTH was a "sign" of God's blessing on a person; even today, you'll hear **some people [including some preachers] say that it's God's will for people to be HEALTHY and financially SECURE**. And to THIS man – HIS wealth is SURELY a sign of God's FAVOR – and to throw it all away seems – quite honestly – INSANE. So **the man turns and walks away from Jesus**.

And the question people have asked for hundreds of years is – **WHY does Jesus ask THIS man to SELL everything, GIVE it away, and ONLY THEN COME FOLLOW him?**

I want to suggest that **the story itself gives us the answer**. The rich man in the story saw himself as a "good person" already – someone willing to give God PART of his life.

But what this man doesn't REALIZE is that **sometimes money/possessions become an obstacle to the reign of God in a person's life**. God calls us to care for those in need and to give with compassion – and when Jesus tells him: *Sell what you have and give it to the POOR* – there is reason to believe THIS is the PROBLEM – **THIS man used his wealth to INSULATE himself from the concerns and needs of others**.

I want to point out: **Jesus doesn't CONDEMN wealth**. Nowhere in the Bible is wealth condemned as "evil". John Wesley, in teaching the early Methodists about the proper role of wealth in the life of the Christian, stressed: *MAKE all you can; SAVE all you can; GIVE all you can*. **It is the LOVE OF MONEY, not money itself, that is evil**.

But while Jesus doesn't condemn WEALTH – his view of POVERTY is another matter. **Grinding poverty is NOT a desired "state of being" for anyone!** Many of Jesus' acts of compassion were on behalf of those who were POOR and DESPERATE. And like the Hebrew prophets before him, **Jesus saved his HARSHTEST WORDS for those who ignored the poor and the root causes of poverty**. To fail to help the poor is to fail to obey God!

That's why Jesus says: *Go – SELL – GIVE TO THE POOR* – because **this man's wealth has become more important to him than caring for others or obeying God**. And when the moment came to make a DECISION – the man chose his wealth. And when the man walks away, Jesus says – *How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!*

It's a statement that leaves the disciples AGHAST. If the WEALTHY don't get in – WHO CAN? And to them – Jesus says: *What is IMPOSSIBLE for people is POSSIBLE with God.* In other words, **eternal life is NOT something we "inherit" or "earn" – it's a GIFT.**

But – **it's a COSTLY GIFT.** To receive this gift requires that we surrender our all to God and be TRANSFORMED [become a new person] by grace – that we allow our lives to come under the influence of God.

And "becoming a new person" is NOT EASY. C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, once said: *With God – ALL things are possible – even getting a large camel through the eye of a needle. But it's AWFULLY HARD on the camel!*

To follow Jesus is to discover that the TRUE WEALTH of a person isn't measured by their stock portfolio or the balance in their savings account. TRUE WEALTH comes by receiving God's grace and loving God and others.

There was once a very wealthy man with lots of land who each week would get in his pickup truck and ride over his vast estate. It just so happened that on the edge of his property was a cabin, and the landowner allowed a tenant farmer to live there and farm a parcel of land in exchange for some of the profit. Each week the landowner would stop at the farm and visit with the farmer.

On one of the visits, the 2 men were talking. In the course of the conversation, the farmer told the landowner: *I had the STRANGEST DREAM last night – the RICHEST MAN IN THE VALLEY will die tomorrow.* The landowner scoffed at the farmer's dream – but he couldn't get it out of his mind. He thought about it all afternoon and through the night – and the next morning he made an appointment with his doctor and got a thorough exam. The doctor pronounced him "fit as a fiddle" – and he decided he'd go back to the farmer's house to show him he was OK!

But when the landowner came near the farmer's cabin, he noticed a crowd gathered – and the landowner was greeted with sad news: early that morning, the farmer had died during his sleep. The landowner looked around – at the farmer's wife, his children, neighbors and friends – ALL who came to offer their sympathy and respects. And as the landowner looked on – he realized THE FARMER'S DREAM HAD COME TRUE. The "richest man in the valley HAD died – but it WASN'T the landowner. IT WAS THE FARMER – who was "rich" in family and friends.

Brothers and Sisters – sometimes WE fall "under the influence" of money and possessions. We can come to believe that if we just have THIS amount of

money or THAT car or house – then we’ve “made” it – we’ve “arrived”. We’re ALL living “under the influence” of SOMETHING. Which “influence” exerts the GREATEST force on your life?

Jesus invited a man to live “under the influence” of God. He invites US to do that too. What will YOU need to “give up” to follow him?
Let us pray....