Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Pentecost 23B
Peace, Seattle
October 18, 2015
Mark 10:17-31

ENOUGH

A poor farmer dies and goes to heaven.
When he reaches the pearly gates, he finds himself next to a man who's obviously rich.
Moments later St. Peter appears, opens the gates and invites the rich man in.

The farmer peers through the gates as the rich man walks into the golden city, and what he sees amazes him:

- A chorus of angels greets him with a rousing Bach chorale
- Crowds fill the streets shouting words of welcome
- When the noise dies down, St. Peter gives a speech and concludes by saying, WELCOME TO THE CITY OF GOD. MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME!

Finally, it's the farmer's turn.
Returning to the gates, St. Peter opens them and beckons the farmer in.
And though he's greeted warmly, there is no angel chorus and no great crowd either.

WELCOME TO THE CITY OF GOD! says St. Peter. MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME.

But the poor farmer doesn't move…he just stands there, shocked and hurt.

ALL MY LIFE I'VE WATCHED THE RICH GAIN PRIVILEGES THAT THE POOR WERE DENIED, he says. I ALWAYS FIGURED THAT HERE EVERYONE WOULD BE EQUAL.

BROTHER, says St. Peter, LET ME ASSURE YOU, EVERYTHING WILL BE THE SAME FOR YOU AND THE OTHER MAN. BUT YOU MUST UNDERSTAND—THIS IS A SPECIAL OCCASION!

WE RECEIVE POOR FARMERS HERE EVERY DAY, BUT WE HAVEN'T SEEN A RICH MAN IN YEARS![1]

A man kneels before Jesus and asks: WHAT MUST I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?

And Jesus gives him a textbook answer: FOLLOW THE COMMANDMENTS.

BUT TEACHER, says the man, looking for more, I'VE KEPT ALL THESE SINCE I WAS A KID.

YOU LACK ONE THING, Jesus tells him.
GO, SELL WHAT YOU OWN, GIVE THE MONEY TO THE POOR, THEN COME, FOLLOW ME.

When the man heard this, Mark writes, he was shocked! And he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

It's a very contemporary story. It's the only time in the gospels when someone is directly invited by Jesus to follow, and instead of following, he walks away. And the reason is money.

We fantasize about winning the lottery. We daydream about greater wealth giving us greater freedom. We're convinced our lives would be easier if only we had more disposable income.

[1] From William R. White, *Stories for Telling*, p.106.

Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

But this story asks the question: Do we own our stuff? Or does our stuff own us?

The more we have the more difficult it seems to be to entrust our lives into God's care.
HOW HARD IT WILL BE FOR THOSE WHO HAVE WEALTH TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD!

What is it about wealth and consumption that make us not want to trust God?

Seattle filmmaker John DeGraaf gets at the material side of this question in his film AFFLUENZA.[2]

Affluenza, he says, is the "unhappy condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the pursuit of more." And there are eight primary symptoms:

(1) First, swollen expectations about what material things we can and should have.
(2) Shopping fever, which makes consumption into a cure instead of a disease.
(3) Chronic stress, because our lives are more and more taken up with paying off stuff instead of investing in people.
(4) Growing materialism in our children. Kids have become a consumer cash crop to be harvested.
(5) A rash of bankruptcies as a result of easy credit and the compulsion to overspend. In 2014 more Americans filed for bankruptcy than graduated from college.
(6) Fractured marriages; the pressures of living the ever-inflating American dream take their toll on family life.
(7) Social scars; the gap in this country between rich and poor is the largest of any industrialized nation in the world, and it's only growing bigger.
(8) Global infection; we are exporting our consumer mentality around the world. The problem is, there's no way the earth can support the level of consumption we Americans have reached.

In the second half of the 20th century, are country alone used more resources collectively than all the people who ever lived before us, in the history of planet.

When you hear the symptoms of Affluenza, it's hard to deny that we—and increasingly others as well—are experiencing this disease in epidemic proportions.

We've turned our lives over to the accumulation and care and maintenance and preservation of our stuff. **Do we own our stuff? Or does our stuff own us?**

William Willimon tells the story about an elderly parishioner who called him one day so distraught over the phone that he could hardly make out what she was saying.

I'VE BEEN ROBBED, she sobbed. SOMEONE HAS STOLEN ALL MY FAMILY HEIRLOOMS! THE SILVER! THE CHINA! ALL THE THINGS MY MOTHER SAVED FOR ME, GONE!

He rushed over to her house. She was overcome with grief. All these things had meant so much to her, she had treasured each one. Her friends wondered if she'd survive the blow.

But six months later, on another visit to her home, Willimon couldn't believe what he heard:

> YOU KNOW PASTOR, the woman said. IN ONE SENSE, THE BURGLARY WAS ONE OF THE BEST THINGS THAT HAS HAPPENED TO ME…
> I DIDN'T REALIZE IT, BUT I HAD BECOME TIED DOWN TO THOSE THINGS. I WAS AFRAID TO LEAVE THE HOUSE FOR FEAR THIS MIGHT HAPPEN. THAT WAS REALLY STUPID

[2] You can watch the film and access other educational materials here: http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/

Sermon copyright © 2015 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

> WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT. LIFE OUGHT TO BE MORE. I THOUGHT I WOULD DIE AFTER THE BURGLARY, BUT I'VE COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT I MAY BE BETTER OFF WITHOUT ALL THAT STUFF.

There's a poster I've seen of a little tree frog hanging between three reeds with nowhere to go. His hind legs are clinging to two reeds in back of him, one front leg grasps another reed in front of him and the other reaches forward, empty. The frog can't move anywhere unless he's willing to let go of something first. Neither can we. And it's not just the STUFF itself—it's what's behind it.

> "In renunciation it is not the comforts, luxuries and pleasures that are hard to give up," Ghandi once observed. "Many could forego heavy meals, a full wardrobe, a fine house, et cetera; it is the ego that they cannot forego. The self that is wrapped, suffocated in material things—which include social position, popularity, and power—is the only self they know and they will not abandon it for an illusory new self...which they many never attain."[3]

Following Jesus on the Way demands that we relinquish lesser kingdoms, writes Richard Rohrer. But we're afraid to do so because those kingdoms provide the only status and security we've ever known.[4] Even when we know that the disease of AFFLUENZA holds us captive, it's hard for us to imagine other options.

It's not an easy path our Lord sets before us. And as we see, Jesus' prescription for the rich man's AFFLUENZA proved too hard for him to swallow.

But we don't have to make the journey all at once. We can take it one step at a time.
As poet Antonio Machado has said, "we make the way by walking."

Today Jesus looks upon us, as he looked upon the rich man, and loving us, he invites us to a deeper and more faithful way of living in the world. And he promises to stick by us every step of the way.

That journey, that Way, begins here at this Table.

Here he offers not only food but his very self. Feeding us, he opens our eyes and hearts to one another, and equips us in turn to walk with neighbors, family members, coworkers, friends—in ways that build community and sustain the world.

That's the journey we're on together. A letting go finger by finger so we can grab hold of the life that truly is life. The way of Jesus, our Lord.

Amen.

[3] Mahatma Ghandi. *Ghandi, His Life and Message for the World*.
[4] Richard Rohrer, *On the Threshold of Transformation*.