

First and last

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2015.

Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. Mark 10:31

Just when we think we think we are doing just fine by keeping all the commandments and following all the rules, we are jolted into one thing we are lacking. Jesus tells us that our success can be our undoing. In the story of the rich young man who tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments, he is dismayed at being told that he must sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. This man is the equivalent of those in the one percent who have everything and is unwilling to part with any of it. This is also the only recorded story of anyone rejecting Jesus' criteria for being one of his disciples. I can just hear this wealthy young man trying to justify his refusal to follow Jesus with the argument that his teachings are nothing more than socialism.

We are left wondering if we really are expected to take Jesus literally and sell everything we have and give the money to the poor. It is important to understand that this is less about generosity and more about our attitude toward our possessions, the point being that the more we acquire material things, the less we are able to perceive spiritual concerns.

Jesus makes his point about the burden of having too much emphasis on material things in his exaggerated image of how it is easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Some biblical scholars believe that the reference to a camel is a mistranslation and that Jesus was referring to putting a large rope through the eye of a needle.

Let us not be too harsh with the young man. He is a not bad person. He does his best in trying to do the right thing in the best way he knows how. He is the modern equivalent of anyone trying to live the dream of having it all. He has a Harvard MBA and earns an impressive salary well into six figures in a venture capital firm. He owns two SUV's and keeps his life organized on his laptop with a cell phone receiver tucked in his ear. He goes to his kids' hockey and soccer games and plays golf at the country club. He and his family go off every weekend in the winter to their ski house in New Hampshire and in the summer they head for their cottage on the Cape. Their children attend the best private schools and are sent off to sports camp in the summer. They belong to a church and attend when not away on weekends but if you ask, he can't remember the name of the church or the priest. He may sign a pledge card but forget to make good on it.

He is never quite satisfied with his life because something is missing and he doesn't know what it is. The one thing he lacks is a sense of being a part of something greater than his drive to have it all. Only when he comes face to face with reality is he forced to reevaluate his priorities.

He is part of the richest nation on earth, yet he is only vaguely aware that malnutrition and disease cause the death of thousands living in poverty every day in third world countries.

For those of us who are used to having everything we need, it is difficult for us to relate to those who go without. Life is more than a price to be bargained for, more than a commodity to be purchased. Our possessions cannot and will not provide happiness or love, only a false sense of security.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with making money and having nice things. It is the inordinate love of things that causes us to lose perspective. If we live for the sake of acquiring material things, we are missing out on what really matters on which a price cannot be set.

There comes a point in each life where we have to come to terms with our value system and the importance of how we use what we have. If we are going to do God's work, we can't let ourselves be encumbered with material things. To be unburdened of our possessions, we have to ask the difficult question of whether we own them or they own us. It all has to do with

our attitude and the value we place on material things. It takes work to prevent material things from accumulating. Hoarding is a serious problem for those who can't part with anything. A good place to begin is to take what don't need to thrift shops and recycling centers.

I have asked myself what I would do if I lost everything. I keep my doors locked and carry property insurance, but I know that if I were to lose it all I would be all right. It wouldn't be the end of the world. I once knew a family whose home was completely destroyed by fire. I went to see them after the flames were extinguished and saw everything in ruins. I was impressed with their attitude toward their loss. They were glad to have gotten out alive. With the generosity of friends they were able to start all over again.

If I lost everything I owned, it would be difficult, but it wouldn't destroy my life. The more we are able to go without, the better off we are. Many successful people are very generous in sharing what they have for the benefit of others. They want to give back some of their good fortune. How about you? If financial concerns and material possessions impede having a better relationship with God, then it is time to reevaluate your value system. No monetary value can be place on our relationship with God and those we love.

The question we have to ask is if our possessions are an impediment to finding meaning and contentment. Take an inventory of your life. What do you need to be happy and fulfilled? The answer is crucial.