

We're #2!

Psalm 41:1-3
Mark 10:17-31

The 2010 NCAA championship game, between Butler and Duke at Lucas Oil Stadium, came down to the last five seconds. Duke, ahead by two points, had a free throw attempt. They missed and Gordon Hayward grabbed the rebound. He dribbled to mid-court and launched a desperation shot. It looked so on-target that legendary sportswriter Mike Lupica hugged his seatmate and screamed, "It's good!" The next day he would write in the New York Daily News, "Except for the Duke fans, *everybody* in Lucas Oil was willing that ball to go through the hoop." It did not. It was perfectly aimed but an inch too long. It glanced off the back rim and Duke had another title.

At the post-game press conference, a reporter asked Butler player Shelvin Mack the inevitable—and dumb—question: "How does it feel?" But Mack gave a surprising answer: "Actually, I feel okay. I mean, we almost won. Nobody but us thought we would get so far. Look, I'm not going to run around chanting, 'We're #2! We're #2!' But we played our guts out and I am proud of us." That is amazing maturity from a twenty year-old man. Speaking as a sixty-two year-old man who still feels bitter about certain basketball losses sustained over forty years ago, I marvel at people who can put such things in perspective. Number Two is not bad. Speaking of Number Two, on which holiday does the United States spend the second-most money? (Christmas, of course, is Number One.) That's right, Halloween.

According to the National Association of Retailers, Americans will spend nearly \$103 on Halloween this year *per person*. That makes the total for the whole nation over 34 billion with a B dollars. We spend about equally on house decorations, candy and costumes. The pumpkins are the least expensive item. This is a stewardship sermon. Our summary theme today is, “steward your stuff—including money”. I do not mean to criticize those who get into Halloween. I honestly enjoy my across the street neighbors' extensive decorations and lights. As I kid I *loved* getting that candy. But as stewards of all God's gifts we need to ask ourselves whether we have gone a little overboard with Halloween, and Christmas, and Easter, and and and. Think of it as the Opportunity Cost of stewardship. If I spend my money on A, I cannot also spend it on B. (Except if I go wild with my credit card, but that is another sermon.) If I spend my money on stuff, I cannot spend it on mission.

Steward your stuff—including money. The Seekers and Searchers Bible study met this week. Before we started one attendee told a familiar story. She and her husband have lived in the same house for years. Recently, their adult child or children visited specifically for the purpose of making them go through their stuff. I believe she said they went through eight boxes of children's books alone. Now, I will admit I am the pot calling the kettle black. I own tools I have not used in decades—a few I have never used at all—that I have absolutely no intention of getting rid of. I have no idea how many LP records and CDs I own. I throw or give away a little (mostly clothes) and keep getting more stuff. Meanwhile we read today that Jesus told a rich young man to sell all he had, give the money to the poor and follow him.

Oh oh. Once again we find ourselves in a seemingly impossible bind. Jesus tells us to do a thing we have no intention of doing—and possibly cannot do. But two important details in this story give us hope for redemption. One, when Jesus learned the rich young man had obeyed God's law scrupulously, he looked on him and loved him. He had sympathy for the guy. He has sympathy for us as well. Two, at the close of a subsequent conversation with his disciples, when they asked who could be saved when nobody could do what Jesus demanded, he replied, “with humanity it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.” We cannot steward our stuff as we ought, yet God can still bring us into a saving fellowship with God.

In the verses just preceding ours, Jesus defines entrance into the Kingdom of God as a gift given to those who confess their helplessness when trying to enter it on their own. Immediately after these verses Jesus will make the third prophecy of his passion, of his death on the cross. Thus, the call to self-denial found in our passage fits into the larger narrative of the whole Gospel. We are sinners. We need a Savior. Our Savior came, teaching truth and calling for radical obedience. But he would have to die because we ultimately cannot obey. Stewarding our stuff belongs to a vast spectrum of such calls we cannot answer on our own. Yet we must make the attempt, and then trust God that Jesus' death on the cross still atones for our failures.

One way we can steward our stuff is to try to not to amass so much of it in the first place. Yes, it may be too late for most of us on this one, yet it bears repeating. Lao-Tzu was an ancient Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism, an Oriental

religion. Important themes in his teaching include veneration of ancestors, preservation of the environment, obedience to civil authorities as God's appointed representatives, and respect for all human beings. Confucianism, another Chinese philosophy/religion, uses as its primary text the Analects of Confucius. In one analect a disciple asks Lao-Tzu how many cloaks a man needs to own. "One is necessary," Lao-Tzu replies. "Two are convenient. More is self-indulgent." I have five coats and two sweatshirts in my hall closet. And four suit jacket coats in my bedroom closet. Plus one more suit coat here in my office.

Trying not to amass too much stuff, or trying to divest ourselves of excess stuff, makes a number of good outcomes possible. Having less frees us from the worry and cost of having to protect it all. It helps us to answer Jesus' call to radical relationship. The command to follow him is an invitation to lay hold of an authentic life offered as a gift in his own person. He claims us utterly. But he offers himself unreservedly. He looks on us and loves us. He wants us to walk with him. What is this strange hold stuff has on us? Leaving aside sentimental items (the toys my father made for my children) and the truly necessary (one set of dishes), all else is, honestly, an expensive burden we drag around with us. And the poor could use some of it.

"Blessed are they who consider the poor!" writes our anonymous Psalmist. The Lord delivers them in their day of trouble. The Lord sustains them on their sickbeds. Psalm 41 belongs to the surprisingly large category of psalms about victory over enemies and/or healing from deadly disease. But it leads off with this praise for those

who “consider” the poor. Indeed, giving to the poor was, with prayer and obedience of God's law, one of the three pillars of ancient Judaism. Giving to the poor not only blesses them, it earns blessings from God for the giver. Jesus would echo this idea at the end of our Markan passage. Those who follow him will be blessed a hundredfold “in this time”, and will receive eternal life in the age to come.

Note that Jesus does not promise a material blessing. Giving to the poor is not some sort of investment product. Its promised dividends are spiritual, not material. We have recently spoken of youth groups going on mission trips. Why is something so hard so popular among young people? Is it not because they learn the joy that giving brings us? How do exhausted new parents get through all those sleepless nights? Is it not at least in part because they loved those babies from their moments of conception? In a sense, those babies are giving right back to them.

You read these stories of a group of commuters pooling their resources to buy a used car for the guy who has been walking miles to get to work, or of a customer leaving a thousand dollar tip for the overworked server. So long as they do not try to manipulate the recipients, nor to lord it over them, these are moments of pure godliness that bless all involved. “When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed,” wrote poet Maya Angelou. We can add that time is one of the most precious things we can give. It is precious because most of us seem to have so little of it, and because it means so much to every recipient. Kids Hope is one great way to give time. The pattern I have observed with the three little guys I have

mentored starts with confusion. (“Why does this strange adult want to come and spend half an hour with *me?*”) But as the weeks go by you become more comfortable with each other. You learn what this specific child likes and needs. And you try to give it. They become thankful. Sometimes they even say so. Consider whether Kids Hope might be one way for you to give time.

In Mark 10 his disciples understand that the way Jesus spoke of the rich would bar all people from the kingdom. By saying God has the power to make it happen, he reassures them—and us. Yet while giving to the poor does not earn us a place at his table, his command that we do so remains. Give your time, your stuff, even your money. This *is* a stewardship sermon. Next Sunday we ask that you come to church prepared to place your pledge card for giving in 2022 in the offering plate. Just two weeks ago the elders approved the gifting of thousands of dollars from your offerings to four Terre Haute agencies that minister to the poor. The Mission Committee plans to ask for authorization to give more before the end of the year. In a concrete way, a portion of your giving does already get given to the poor.

But we can always give more. Give some of your stuff away. Give your time. Steward your stuff—including money.