

## **Message for October 9, 2022**

### **Thanksgiving Sunday**

#### **Mark 10:17-27**

There was once a blind boy who was sitting on the steps of a building with a hat by his feet and a sign which read, "I am blind, please help me". Very few people however chose to help him and there were only a few coins in the hat. A man who was walking by took a few coins from his pocket and dropped them in. He then took the boy's sign, wrote on it, and put it back. Before long the hat began to fill up with money. Later in the afternoon the man who had changed the sign came back to see how things were going. The boy asked him, "Were you the one who changed my sign this morning? What did you write?" The man said, "I only wrote the truth. I said what you said but in a different way. I wrote 'Today is a beautiful day but I cannot see it'". Both of the messages told the people that the boy was blind but while the first simply said that the boy was, the second reminded the people that they were so fortunate that they could see what the boy could not. This filled them with such a sense of gratitude that in response they gave. And that of course is what today and this very weekend are all about; being grateful and giving thanks for the blessings we have.

In today's scripture passage Mark tells us that one day Jesus was approached by a young man who was both very wealthy and very religious. He was however also very troubled. He realized that there was something missing in his life and thought that Jesus might know the answer. He asked Jesus, "what do I have to do to inherit the life everlasting?" Jesus' answer was to tell him to keep the Ten Commandments. "But I have, and I know that it's not enough!" he replied. Impressed by the young man, Jesus then told him that there was one more thing that he had to do; he had to sell his goods, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow him. As Mark tells us though, the young man didn't accept Jesus' invitation. Yes, he knew that there was something missing in his life but how could he possibly give up all that he had? He decided that he would not, and sadly walked away.

It is easy enough perhaps for us to pass over this episode without realizing the significance of what just happened. Through the years Jesus had asked other people to follow him and they had invariably said yes. This however is the one and only time in his entire ministry when Jesus invited someone to follow

him and was turned down flat. Mark clearly implies that the twelve disciples were absolutely shocked by this, and so Jesus felt that he had to give an explanation why.

“How hard it is for those with riches to enter the kingdom of God”, he said. Far from being a blessing, that young man’s wealth was a barrier between him and God. Well, if the disciples were dumbfounded by this statement, then they must have been absolutely flabbergasted by what Jesus said next. “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”. But why were the disciples so shocked?

Because they, like virtually everyone else back then and a lot of people since, equated material wealth with God’s favour. It was thought that if a person was well off, then God obviously loved them. And if a person was not quite so materially blessed, then it was equally obvious that God didn’t love them as much. A person’s material blessings were, in a manner of speaking, a barometer reflecting their standing with God. This was conventional wisdom but here was Jesus saying that this wasn’t true, and far from being a blessing, a person’s so-called ‘blessings’ could even be a barrier between them and God! Mark tells us that the disciples were shocked by this and asked, “who then could be saved?” Jesus’ reassuring answer was to say that with God anything is possible.

With God all things are possible: these are words of reassurance to be sure but we are still left in a bit of an awkward spot. This is the day set aside for thanking God for all of our blessings and yet here we have Jesus himself saying that our so-called blessings might not really be blessings at all and are in fact the exact opposite. But then again, it is up to us to decide whether life’s good things are truly blessings or not.

As I know I have said before in previous Thanksgiving sermons, the word Thanksgiving isn’t just a noun, an occasion that we celebrate, the word is also a verb, and it is what we do. At Thanksgiving we *give thanks*. We do this in different ways too. In this morning’s worship service for example we are giving thanks in song and prayer, but we are also giving thanks through the offering. Whether it be used here in the service of our own church family or in the larger church of which we are a part, it is a gift of thanks. We are also giving thanks today through our gifts of money for the Salvation Army’s food bank, gifts that will enable them to buy needed food items that have not been donated. And it is

through actions such as these that we ensure that our blessings really are blessings, and not barriers between us and God. Our blessings only truly become blessings when they are shared, and that is the message of this story that I would like to share with you now. Some of you may recognize it from a Thanksgiving sermon that I preached years ago but to me this story captures what this weekend is really all about. It is taken from Robert Fulghum's book "Oh-Oh".

"You might as well know now. A cigar is the centrepiece of what follows. And you might as well know that I have been known to smoke one of those things from time to time, despite what I know about all the good reasons not to. Moreover, I only had one puff from this cigar. Yet it was the cigar I will never forget.

One fine fall morning in San Francisco. In a great mood. A week of hard work had gone well, and now I had a couple of days off to myself. So I had gone into Dunhill's and bought the finest cigar in the shop.

After a few blocks' walk, it was cigar time. One puff, and I said aloud to myself: 'Now that, that, is some cigar!'

It so happened that I had been standing in front of a coffee house. A cup of fine espresso would add the final right ingredient to a recipe for a memorable morning. Placing the lit cigar carefully on the brick window ledge of the coffee house, I went inside to order. While waiting at the counter, I glanced out the window to check on my cigar. Gone. My cigar was gone.

Abandoning my coffee, I rushed to the door. And stopped short. There on the other side of the glass was an old man examining my cigar. He held the cigar with respect under his nose and smelled it with eyes closed. He smiled. Looking carefully up and down the street, he took a puff. And smiled again. With a heavenward salute with the cigar, he set off down the street. Smoking my cigar. I followed, not knowing quite what to do.

The old man. Italian. First generation immigrant probably. As were the friends he visited to report the good news of the cigar that fate had prepared for him that fine day. I got a tour of the old Italian quarter. At each stop, in passionate terms, he exalted his cigar, his good fortune, and this lovely day.

Each friend was offered a sample puff. The fruit vendor squeezed the cigar and approved its ripeness. The baker puffed twice and pronounced the cigar 'primo, primo'. The priest gave the cigar a mock blessing.

In time the old man turned toward the bocce ball courts ... and when he arrived, he repeated his ritual celebration of the cigar and his good luck. The cigar burned down to a short stub. As it came his turn to play, the old man meditated on the end of the cigar with clear regret. He did not toss it to the ground and grind it underfoot as I might have done. No. Solemnly he walked over to a flower bed, scooped a small hole beneath a rosebush, laid the cigar butt to rest, covered it with dirt, and patted the small grave smooth with his hands. Pausing, he raised his cap in respect, smiled, and returned to playing the game." Fulghum concludes:

"The old man may have smoked it, but I've not enjoyed a cigar more. It remains the very finest cigar I never had".

The best cigar that Fulghum ever had was the one that he never had; it was the one that he, however inadvertently, had shared. And there is a message in this episode for us on this Thanksgiving Sunday. We have so much that we can and should be grateful for, but our blessings can only truly become blessings when we are prepared to share them. And so I wonder on this day of thanksgiving: are the things that we are giving thanks for today truly blessings?

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious God, on this Thanksgiving Sunday we give you thanks for the earth, the lakes and oceans, all teeming with riches. We thank you for this land in which we live, blessed as it is with peace, security, and prosperity.

We thank you for our families and friends and everyone else who touches our lives for the better.

We thank you for the holy mysterious wonder that is you. You are the Father who created us. You are the Son who saves us. You are the Spirit who

guides us. On this day of Thanksgiving we thank you, for truly you have blessed us with so much in so many different ways. Even as we give you thanks though, we remember and pray for all who, with good reason, may not feel so blessed and inclined to give thanks.

We pray this day for all who are ill. On this weekend when so many families get together, we pray for all who are unable to do so, and for those who, for whatever reason, will not. We pray for all who miss a loved one, facing their first Thanksgiving without their presence.

We pray this day for all who hunger or have no place to call home and must rely on the charity of others for even the most basic of life's necessities.

We pray for everyone, both in our own land and elsewhere, who are picking up the pieces of their lives after the recent destructive hurricanes.

We pray for your church and her ministry throughout the world, that she and we may truly be a source of caring, shining in the darkness as beacons of light in what is so often a dark and hurting world.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen