



“Possessor? Or Possessed?”

Text: Mark 10:17-31

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

March 1, 2020

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Here, at First Pres, we do our best to give you a little more than you might expect at other churches on a Sunday morning. It's not because we're trying to proclaim ourselves better than others. It's just that you've come to expect a little more than the average and none of us on staff wants to disappoint you.

So, as we begin our sermon this morning, let me take you back to September 8, 2009. Let's go down to Saluda, South Carolina. Saluda is about 50 miles, give or take, west of Columbia. It's the county seat of Saluda County and has a population of around 4,000 souls.

One of those souls, back in September of 2009, was Mr. Lonnie Holloway who lived to be 90 years old. Mr. Lonnie had some instructions that might seem strange to us, but they were his instructions and they were followed to the letter. Mr. Lonnie left clear instruction that, when he died, he was to be buried in the front seat of his 1973 Pontiac Catalina. In the interest of full disclosure, I have a certain affinity for 1973 Pontiac Catalinas, since my family owned a metallic green convertible model, with white leather interior, which I drove in high school.

But, back to Mr. Lonnie. Mr. Lonnie wished to have his service at the Rock Hill Baptist Church and, if local news sources are to be believed, Mr. Lonnie's funeral broke all attendance records. Hundreds showed up for the funeral. The pastor was quoted as saying, "This day will be burned in our memories for years and years to come because just ain't never seen nothing like this before." That is not a pastoral understatement.

However, as they say on the infomercials, "but wait, there's more."

Mr. Lonnie wanted to be buried with his favorite possessions in the car with him. So, in the front seat of the '73 Catalina were Mr. Lonnie and his guns, which he wanted buried with him so no one could get hold of them and shoot someone. The massive grave for the Catalina was right next to Mr. Lonnie's wife, who had predeceased him.

A wrecker lifted the Catalina and Mr. Lonnie into the air and then lowered him into the grave. A concrete slab was poured over the car and its occupant and they are there together to this day.

Mr. Lonnie might not have been able to take the Catalina and guns with him, but he took them as far as he could.

A young man of some means approached Jesus and asked him a question. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, to get the full impact of this interaction, we need to peek ahead in Mark's telling of the story. Mark tells us, after the encounter - almost as if offering an explanation - that the young man "had many possessions."

On closer examination, this tells us quite a bit about this young man. He was, in the first place, "young." He had not lived a sufficient number of years to amass wealth. That, in turn, tells us that he was a member of one of three classes of the elite: a senator, an equestrian, or a decurion. These were the wealthy in the Empire of Caesar and comprised the top 2% or 3% of the Empire's population of 55 to 60 million people. This young man had money in the old-fashioned way - he inherited it.

His entire identity was based on his wealth. He had never known life without enormous resources. While the common laborer of the day might earn 2 or 3 sesterces a day, people in this young man's class were earning 500 to 600 sesterces a day. It was, what some call, an income gap.

And with the young man's wealth went the accoutrements of wealth. He held land, was involved in trade, possessed real estate for farming and rental properties for cash flow. His homes were filled with fine furnishings and were well-kept by a contingent of slaves. He had closets of clothes, all the food he could desire, entertainments at his command, and received a morning salutatio - a nearly royal greeting from his household and community members.

That's who this young man was. That was the world in which he moved.

And he comes to Jesus, kneels before him, and addresses Jesus as "Good Teacher." It is not impossible that there is a little "buttering up" going on here. He has obviously heard of Jesus and he is obviously attracted to Jesus' message. Or is he?

The young man asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" His favorite method of advancement is not hidden. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

But, "eternal life" is something requiring a quick look. Eternal life is far more than what happens after we die. Eternal life is about here-and-now. Consistent with the world view of the time, the time of the Roman Empire was seen to be fleeting, because it failed to recognize the fullness of what God intended for the world - what we have come to call the Kingdom, or the Empire, of God. God was expected to intervene in the world's course of things and establish a new age, or a new era, in which God's Empire would usher in a new creation. That new creation - that Empire of God - would be marked by God as sovereign and with God's justice as the dominant force. The Empire of God would see healed bodies, abundant food for all, peace among nations, equality among

people, truth established as a pillar of civilization, and mercy and compassion for all people.

“What must I do to inherit a place in the new age that is to come?” That’s the question the rich young man is asking. “How can I be a part of this new creation of God?” It may well be that the rich young man is genuinely interested in what Jesus is proclaiming. It could also well be that the rich young man is “hedging his bets.” The rich young man may be trying to figure out a way - like Mr. Lonnie Holloway did - of taking his beloved possessions with him into whatever this new creation of God might be.

There was something about the young man that Jesus liked. In fact, the gospel tells us, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him...” (Mark 10:21) It’s the only time in Mark’s gospel that Jesus is said to love another person.

So, Jesus tells the rich young man how he might *inherit* a place in this new thing that God is about to do. “You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” The rich young man is obviously a child of Israel, for he hears Jesus reminding him of the second tablet of the law - the commandments which deal with how we live together as a society. He’s heard all this before and he’s kept these commandments.

But, what was that one you slipped in there, Jesus? “You shall not defraud?” That’s not in the Ten Commandments. No it isn’t. But it is the greater development of the Levitical law.

In Leviticus, we read:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: When any of you sin and commit a trespass against the Lord by deceiving a neighbor in a matter of a deposit or a pledge, or by robbery, or if you have defrauded a neighbor, or have found something lost and lied about it - if you swear falsely regarding any of the various things that one may do and sin thereby - when you have sinned and realize your guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud or the deposit that was committed to you, or the lost thing that you found, or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realize your guilt. And you shall bring to the priest, as your guilt offering to the Lord, a ram without blemish from the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering. The priest shall make atonement on your behalf before the Lord, and you shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and incur guilt thereby. (Leviticus 6:1-7)

For the young man, Jesus is making the move from “preaching” to “meddling.”

“I’ve kept all those commandments, Jesus,” the rich young man says. “I’m a good guy. I’m a nice guy. People like me, they really do.”

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Hold on, Jesus. I came for a salvation sermon and you’re preaching stewardship? What do you have against me, Jesus?

And here's that part of the sermon that makes us all squirm just a bit. This rich young man and the power and influence he possesses because of his wealth are not part of what God has in store for that Empire which is to come. Using people to benefit our bottom line is not a part of the Empire of God. Failing to provide for those who have little or nothing is not part of the Empire of God.

Jesus is challenging the rich young man - and the rest of us - to address the heart of the matter. Jesus is calling the young man and the rest of us to address the systems, structures, practices, and vision of a world in which some have more than they need and some have nothing. Jesus is calling for the transformation of a world in which God provides plenty for all, but a world in which there is scarcity, hunger, poverty, and oppression for so very many, because God's provision is not generously shared or justly distributed. Jesus is challenging his disciples of old and his disciples of today to find our very identities transformed from being people of money and the power of influence, who curry the favor and seek the company of others who are rich and influential, and become people who serve the most vulnerable and the weak - those who have been pushed to the margins of our society, those who will be allies and advocates for those who have been the victims of an unjust society and its practices.

And you know the rest. The rich young man walks away, incapable of making the changes Jesus calls him to make. He will not abandon his power and wealth. He will not turn away from his pattern of using people for his own betterment. He will not turn his back on a way of life that is contrary to the life God created us to have. He cannot conceive of a life in which he is not at the top of the ladder, with all the money and power that he can amass and more than he will ever really need. He walks away. It is all just too much to ask.

Is he a possessor? Or is he possessed? Are we possessors? Or are we possessed? That's the assignment we are given on this First Sunday of Lent. Who are we and whose are we? Are we proud and powerful citizens of the Empire of Caesar, who benefit from the injustice of others? Or are we allies and advocates for victims of maltreatment, negligence, and injustice? Are we willing to give up what we proudly call "ours" and care for the countless poor and impoverished of our neighbors who live in hopelessness, despondency, and discouragement?

God has provided plenty and more for our world. God will provide plenty and more in the days to come. Do we believe that?

Are we possessors? Or are we possessed? That is what we are called to answer in these opening days of Lent.

Our answer has significant consequences. So be careful how you answer.

Are we possessors? Or are we possessed?

And if the stars align and you ask me to preach your funeral, please don't ask to be buried in the front seat of a 1973 Pontiac Catalina. That alone would break my heart.

For now and evermore. Amen.