

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
October 10, 2021
28th Sunday of Year B Mark 10:17-27

In today's Gospel Jesus says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." This is not a blanket indictment of all rich people, because in the Gospels we see that there were some who with considerable wealth became followers of Jesus. Although they possessed wealth, they were not possessed by their wealth. What is that quality, or better, what is that attitude that makes it more difficult for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God, i.e., from seeing one's place in the world as God sees it, and consequently living one's life, as God would have them, have us, live it?

If it is difficult for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God, who does Jesus say are most suited to be able to do so? In last Sunday's we heard Jesus say that it is those who have the attitude of a small child who are most suited to hear and accept His message. Jesus says, "Unless you become like little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God." Here we have these two opposites, these two polarities—on the negative side, the rich, and on the positive, little children. What is there about the rich that they just don't get what Jesus is all about? They just don't connect? They may connect with what they imagine "religion" is all about, they may connect with what they think good, decent behavior is all about. They may be "nice" people, but there is something about the way they are "wired" that blocks the flow of God's grace and mercy into their lives.

What is there about wealth, whether bestowed by birth or attained by hard work, that becomes a stumbling block, an obstacle, to real union with God? I think that the spiritual danger of wealth is that all too often it provides a sense of entitlement. One might describe it as a sense of privilege. What it comes down to is the belief, the attitude, that because of who and what I am, because of what I have, my needs should be met before anyone else's. For the rich person, in his or her own mind, is different, is special. This sense of superiority can often breed a certain arrogance, implying "I am better than you." The result is a disconnect with God because there is a disconnect with the needs of other human beings, for God is discovered in the faces of other human beings, especially in the faces of those who are poor, those who are most in need. But if my needs and wants always have to come first, how will I ever find God? If I do not find God in the faces of the needy, I will not find God any place else.

On the other end of the continuum is the child who is the model, the exemplar of discipleship. Why? Because the unspoiled child knows that all he or she possesses has

been given to them by someone else. They can make no claim for special treatment; all they can do is say "thank you;" and it is this sense of appreciation, this attitude of gratitude, which is essential to being a follower of Jesus. The disciple of Jesus who has become like a little child, who possesses that sense of gratitude, realizes that much in their life could have turned out differently than it is right now, if they had not had some lucky breaks along the way. That the accidents of birth, of parenting, of educational opportunity, of happening to meet and know the right people going through life—all these things, over which one had no control, have brought that person to where they are today. And that should foster a sense of gratitude. It was the medieval monk and mystic Meister Eckhart who said, "If the only prayer a person should ever utter in the course of their lifetime was a sincere "Thank you" to God, that would be sufficient for salvation. And why did he say that? From a sense of gratitude flows everything else. Even the Roman orator, Cicero, recognized this when he said, "Not only is a thankful heart the greatest of virtues; it is the parent of all virtues." A sense of gratitude provides the ability to connect with those who do not have what I have, what I have been given. It is that connection with other human beings that connects a person with God. It is a profound sense of gratitude that allows one to be a disciple of Jesus, to enter the Kingdom of God.

Now let me provide a cautionary tale, an example of how all this is played out every day life. A friend happened to be at Lincoln Center one evening. After the performance people were gathering at the garage entrance to get their cars and drive home. While my friend was waiting his turn on line, a certain Hollywood celebrity, who will remain nameless, cuts in at the front of the line. My friend says, "Excuse me, but can't you wait your turn like the rest of us?" At which the "celeb" comes back with, "Don't you know who I am?" To which my friend replies, of course, recognizing who he is, "Sir, I don't know who you are, but I sure know what you are." Again, the danger of wealth is the arrogance—I am special, I come first, the rest of you little people can wait."

Now comes the tricky part. So far, it may seem that I have been speaking about other people. But what about us? Well, you may say, "What do you mean 'us;' I am barely making it, as it is; I'm not rich." If we reflect on what we have in the context of all the other people who live on this planet, then we are rather wealthy. There is no getting away from the fact that a small number of people (of which we are that part) consume a disproportionate share of the world's resources. Is this something we have come to expect as our natural right, that we have the right to consume as much energy as we want, heedless of its effects on our environment and on future generations? Is this not that same sense of entitlement—that our needs, our ambitions, our pleasure should come before everyone else's on the planet? That just

because I can buy something, because I can afford it, because I want it, therefore I have a right to it.

The line between the wealthy and the little child, between an attitude of entitlement and gratitude, is a continuum. Today's Gospel invites us to reflect on where I find myself on that line? What is the attitude that more accurately characterizes my life. Is it one of entitlement or gratitude? And how does that attitude show itself in the choices I make all during the day? Am I careless, unthinking about the things I consume, never thinking about how those things got to me, what were the working conditions of the people who made them? Am I indifferent to the needs of those living in other parts of the world who produce the foods I eat, who make the clothes I wear, who make my life more comfortable, all too often at their expense?

There is a tale from the Native American folklore. A wise old man says to a small child that inside each person there are two hungry wolves, a good one and a bad one, fighting with each other. And the child asks, "Which one is going to win?" To which the old man replies, "It depends on the one you feed." In each of us there are these two wolves; we might call them the wolf of entitlement or privilege and the wolf of gratitude or appreciation. For us, too, it depends on which one we feed. One is fed by absorption with oneself, by carelessness, by indifference, and the other is fed by awareness, by empathy, by a generosity of spirit. Let us pray that we feed the right wolf.