

First Presbyterian Church
Summer Sermon Series: Summer of Love
Mark 10: 17-31 "The Poor Ole Prisoner"
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Our sermon series for this summer is entitled "Summer of Love."
Our staff chose this theme to focus our attention upon how scripture teaches us to love and be loved, according to God.

Our gospel lesson for this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark chapter 10 and is found in all three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is often referred to as the story of the Rich Young Ruler.

Matthew says the man was young; Luke says he was a ruler. But Matthew, Mark and Luke all say that this man was rich.

When a gospel story is found in not one, but all three of the synoptic gospels it is important to ponder why.

Perhaps this story, is inviting us to consider who we are and perhaps to re-discover who we are called to be.

Christ is inviting us into this story.

Listen now for God's word for you:

Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

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.'"

He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said,

"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."

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many

possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again,

"Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

They were greatly astounded and said to one another,

"Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said,

"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

The Word of the Lord...

A few weeks ago I asked Cat if she'd ever been in prison...

After looking at me, then kind of laughing, then seeing that I was serious, she said,

"Well I've visited people in jail, but I've never been hand-cuffed and hauled off to prison for committing a crime if that is what you're asking!"

For future reference, this is good thing to know about Cat.

But then her face changed, as she asked me, about my question.

"Have you, ever been in prison?"

While this scripture lesson is best known as the story of "The Rich Young Ruler" I've renamed it as the story of "The Poor Ole Prisoner." When I was in seminary, my church asked me to be a dancing shepherd for a Christmas play that they were going to perform inside of San Quentin Prison. When you enter San Quinton, there is no doubt that you are in prison!

We were met at the gate by great big, very serious looking, prison guards.

We were escorted into the prison where 2 inch-thick, metal doors slammed shut behind us—with such a loud clang, that we almost jumped out of our skin.

The Warden came by to “welcome” us saying:

“I’m here to remind you, before going further, you have agreed to enter this prison knowing that San Quinton has a no hostage policy. You have chosen to come inside of this prison and you accept the danger involved.

If a prisoner takes you hostage, we will not negotiate your release.

You are on your own.”

My heart sank. I must have missed that ‘no hostage policy’ meeting.

We walked through another set of steel doors and then were lead into the prison chapel.

Prisoners soon entered as we set up for our play.

From that point on I had this creepy feeling that there were eyes watching my every move. I became fearful, self-conscience, aware that every gesture that I made may hold some secret meaning. And I knew, the meaning I least wanted to convey was vulnerability.

Like San Quentin, this gospel story opens our eyes to what it would be like to live inside of a prison. The only difference is that the Poor Ole Prisoner in this gospel story didn’t realize that he was being held captive.

There weren’t any loud clangs from big steel doors slamming shut behind him. And even worse, the eyes that were watching his every move tricked him, because they were full of awe and respect and maybe even envy.

And what really bound this prisoner to **his inner prison cell** was that his whole society of fellow prisoners and even the prison guards, kept telling him:

“Look, at all you have, look at how rich you are, see how powerful you are, see how blessed you are, see how free you are?”

Now the way I see it, this Poor Ole Prisoner was unlucky from the start. He accepted a religious belief system based on fear. It taught that those who obey all the rules and follow all of the commandments will be rewarded with wealth, health and eternal life.

On the other hand, if you don’t follow the rules, then you are going to receive the punishment that you deserve.

It was those in power, the powerful elite that promoted this fear based religion, to keep others, especially, the less fortunate in their place.

The less fortunate, the poor, the widowed, the sick and homeless were seen as deserving of their fate because they, according to their circumstances, must be rule breakers.

Rule followers are rewarded. Rule breakers get what they deserved.

This theology worked in the ancient world, to establish class systems that kept the poor, poor and the wealthy in power.

Theologians call it the Prosperity Gospel, which is preached in many churches today.

If you give this amount to our church you will be blessed with infinite gifts of fame and fortune.

Those who do not follow the biblical principles we teach, will be punished.
The prosperity gospel misinterprets the Gospel of Christ as a rewards vs punishment gospel.

The problem that I have with this belief system is that it lacks compassion, it is elitist, mean spirited, narrow minded and ungodly.
It can create depressed and fearful people who are scared to death to admit that what they really need the most is not fear of punishment, but to be loved.

And so, in our gospel lesson for today we get to examine what Jesus has to say about this fear based reward and punishment, belief system.

You may have noticed that the poor ole prisoner in our story seemed a bit anxious. Even though he seemed to have it all, something inside of him, something **deep-down inside of him**, caused him not to walk, but to run up and kneel before Jesus, a poor, itinerant preacher asking, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I don’t know why he chose to ask this question to Jesus, but something tells me that this poor ole prisoner had real concerns that perhaps the rules may be changing.
Since he was rich, young and a ruler, he didn’t need to worry about his next meal, or a place to sleep. But he seemed worried about receiving eternal life.

Jesus answers:

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 first four commandments teach us how to love God, the last six, the ones Jesus asked the poor ole prisoner about, are focused upon how to **demonstrate our love for God** through our relationships with others.

Honor your parents, do not murder, do not break your marriage vows, do not steal, do not lie, and do not want what others have.

These are the commandments that teach us how we are to treat one another out of respect and love for God. Not out of FEAR of God punishing us.

But the poor ole prisoner missed Jesus’ point.

“Teacher, I have kept all these commandments since my youth.”

And like all “good teachers”, Jesus noticed that the poor ole prisoner answered before he took the time to really hear Jesus’ question.

Keeping the commandments is not the same as living out, the heart of the commandments.

So in v. 21 we hear that, “Jesus looked at him and loved him.”

Jesus offered this poor ole prisoner freedom from all the things, from all of the beliefs that kept him chained inside of his inner prison.

“Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, then come, follow me.”

And with these words the prison doors swung open!
With these words the Poor Ole Prisoner was set free!

Don't you want to yell, “run, run for your life! Get out of that prison!
Let go of all those things you possess.
Let go of all of things that possess you!
Be free!!!”

Well, this is the part of the gospel story that I don't like. This is the part in the story where the Poor Ole Prisoner, turns around and walks away feeling sad.

This is the part where he takes hold of his prison door and slams it shut with such a loud clang that I'm sure it made the whole earth quaked.

And yet this part of the gospel story remains intact in all three synoptic gospels. You would think that at least one of the gospel writers would have changed the ending, so that the Poor Ole Prisoner was set free!

What do you suppose that the gospel writers were hoping we would all come to understand from such a sad ending?

What did the gospel writers hope that we would learn from this Poor Ole Prisoner who walked away from Jesus' call to “give up your possessions, or what possess you and come, follow me?”

I'm not sure what you see, but I can tell you what I see.

I can see myself in this Poor Ole Prisoner.

I can see that part of myself that is sometimes afraid.

Inside of my inner prison there are rooms that hold onto fear, doubt, and even sorrow.

These rooms worry me.

These rooms keep me from living out my life as a true disciple of Jesus.

So, I wonder how are you doing? What inner rooms need to be cleaned out or restored?

Christ is calling all of us to go, get rid of the things that in-prison us

so that we can give what we have, give our very selves to loving others, as we come and follow Christ.

May your summer be filled with kindness and love for all people, especially yourself.

Amen.

