

Bryn Mawr Gives Light: *For Love*

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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2 Corinthians 8:1-7

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷As 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?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

²¹Jesus, 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.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words.

But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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.”

²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” ²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

²⁹Jesus 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, ³⁰who 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.

³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

My friend and pastoral colleague, Kim Clayton, recalls reading a newspaper article some years ago about entrepreneurs and their secrets to accomplishment. It featured a remarkable array of people engaged in a variety of enterprises. High functioning leaders with similar nuggets of advice for success: be passionate about your goals, build a wide network, be resilient and learn from failures, ask for guidance from smart people, don't be afraid of risk. From this A-List of highly successful people, the one that caught Kim's eye was a young girl around ten or eleven years old who was featured as the top seller of Girl Scout cookies in the whole country that year. Kim writes, "I've forgotten now just how many thousands of boxes she had sold, but I've never forgotten her sales method. When asked how she could possibly have sold so many cookies, she said, "Well, I look them right in the eye... and make them feel guilty!"

It's Stewardship Season, and if the story of the Rich Young Ruler does not make us feel a little bit guilty, at least it should feel like Jesus is looking at us right in the eye. This familiar story strikes an emotional chord, while we watch this interchange. The man was asking about eternal life which is, of course, a question about hope. When faced with a choice between clinging to his material wealth or a more meaningful source of life and security, he walked away. We know this story is pointedly directed at Jesus' followers because it is told in all three of the synoptic gospels. We recognize this text as the Story of the Rich Young Ruler, although Mark is the first one who suggests he is rich, Matthew is the only one who says he is young, and Luke is the only one who calls him a ruler.

Because of this encounter we have one of Jesus' hardest sayings: "You lack one thing. Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." None of us can do that can we? Give it all away... We need our home, to provide for our family, to secure our future. Even the disciples confronted Jesus here! The man asked an earnest question about life, and what Jesus said was harsh, a near impossibility. "Look at us," they said, "we've already given up everything to follow you." Jesus reminds them: you do not earn your life; your life is a gift from God.

This story is above all else a love story. In this text we find the one and only time the word love is used by a gospel writer to describe an interaction with Jesus. No other story describes Jesus loving someone as it does here. The man comes to Jesus with a question from his heart: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus loves what he sees: a true seeker, who has kept God's word, and translated his beliefs into genuine obedience, and yet who also knows there is still more to life than following the commandments. He has come to the end of what he can do for himself, what he can earn for himself, the life he can make for himself. *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.”* Here we see how the love Jesus showers upon this seeker is the intense, gut wrenching love one has for a friend whose life hangs in the balance.¹ “You lack one thing,” Jesus says, “Go, sell, give, come, follow... which is Jesus’ way of inviting the man into a life-giving relationship with Jesus himself.

Now, if we want just another guilt-inducing stewardship sermon, we would stop right here. We would stop at this dramatic moment when the man walks away instead of staying with Jesus. However, the text does not stop there. If we simply focus on the rich man who cannot part with his money, we miss the depth and breadth of what Jesus is after – not just for him, but also for us. So we follow to the end where Peter presses Jesus to elaborate a little more saying, “Lord, we have left everything to follow you.” Peter takes the Rich Man’s essential question and asks: “What about us... what do we need to do to inherit eternal life? We have already left our former lives behind.”

Peter’s question pushes us to see that the story actually ends with a promise from Jesus: for his followers will more than be rewarded, a hundredfold with houses, family, and fields. He is talking metaphorically, of course, because no one needs a hundred houses or fields. But the image shows that material wealth – in and of itself -- is not the barrier between us and God. Rather, the barrier is believing and living in such a way that denies our dependence on God. Nothing we do, or earn, or achieve can secure our future. Life is a gift;

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Opposite of Rich”
The Preaching life.

Our ultimate hope comes from God; eternal life is a dependable divine promise.

Friends, we are generally very wealthy in material things. We are the kind of people who have the luxury to ask questions about meaning and hope, and to fret and sometimes argue over what is rightfully ours. This story looks us straight in the eye, not to make us feel guilty but rather to remind us of God's love, to call us to a deeper relationship with God. Please don't take your wealth and walk away. Follow me, Jesus says, and respond to God with gratitude and generosity, with love. Church stewardship is never about guilt or even about raising money. It's always about responding to God's love with our love.

We are privileged at this church to have inherited a Spirit of Generosity to use this church's wealth to make a difference in this community and in a world of need. However, despite our inheritance and our riches, this congregation is not without challenges when it comes to stewardship. Let me share just two of the current realities.

First, we are disproportionately dependent on the generosity of our older members. Our Senior Adults inherited a commitment of putting the church at the top of their list for benevolent giving. Our younger members frankly have more competition for their generosity. And by younger, I mean under 70, folks from the twenties through their sixties. My age and younger folks support good and worthy causes, and the church knows you are contending with more aggressive campaigns from the schools you attended and non-profit organizations doing amazing things. But considering this reality, we can all do the math. The generous example of our older members needs to be undergirded by the growing commitment of younger donors if the church is going to grow - or even maintain - our current level of program and mission support.

Secondly, across the ages of our members, many people who give and pledge generously every year, never raise their pledge. Whether you annually pledge one thousand or twenty thousand dollars, if you have not raised your pledge in ten years, your support is not going as far today, as it was ten years ago. We

give our staff a cost of living increase, and help cover their rising insurance premiums. Recently, we have had to invest a lot of new money to enhance our live streaming capability so that you can tune in wherever you are. That's benefitting three to four hundred people worshipping with us online every week. Our mission partners have greater needs too, and we want generously to respond to them and help increase their outreach.

Since the pandemic we have enjoyed a season of growth and expansion of programmatic offerings and mission initiatives, but our pledging and congregational giving is not keeping up with the church's vision for growth. Can you boost your pledge by a cost of living for Christ increase? And if you give but do not pledge, would you please consider making a pledged commitment so that we can count on your support? Giving is an act of generosity, to be sure. Pledging is an act of faith and long-term commitment.

Like the Rich Young Ruler, do you have material wealth from which you can part to increase your commitment to the church of Jesus Christ? Let's not walk away sorrowful, but be inspired by God's love, be inspired by Jesus' invitation to follow, be inspired to respond with increased giving to this wonderful church, as we remember everything we have of ultimate value is a gift of God's love.

Many of you know that my family has a house in Montreat, North Carolina, just fifteen miles east of Asheville. Several of you have been kind to ask how it survived Hurricane Helene. Our house is fine. We had one small leak and lost a tree which fell into the woods away from the house. We were lucky, and are fully aware of how rich we are – in comparison to people who have lost everything, by the fact we even have a second home.

We have close friends down in Black Mountain who were similarly lucky in that their house did not flood. But the edge of their property runs along the lower elevation of Flat Creek, the creek that became a river in Montreat washing out roads and bridges as it raged down the mountain. Their low-lying property became the repository of so many belongings of neighbors they don't know who just happens to live upstream. Half a trailer home landed in Shannon and Greg's yard. A brand-new riding lawnmower. A couple of sinks.

A woman's leather boot. Two walkers. A collection of trophies won by a high school athlete twenty years ago. An old, framed photograph of a beautiful girl in pigtails. A China teacup. None of these things is worth a dime now. But every single one of them is priceless, because they represent a life. The life God gives. Not one of us needs more stuff, God knows, but the gospel is looking us in the eye today, asking if we can be more giving, more generous, more responsive to God's love. Out of deepening commitment to the church which calls and nurtures disciples of Jesus Christ to serve in a world desperate for our help, desperate for our help. May we increase our commitment - not out of guilt. But out of gratitude. Out of love.

Amen.