

On not being owned by what we own

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on October 11, 2009, the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

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 heaven. Mark 10:25

What the story of the rich young ruler tells us is that just when we think we are doing quite well at keeping the commandments and following the rules we are jolted into what is lacking. When the young man tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments, he is told that he lacks one thing. He must sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. You can just hear him accusing Jesus of being a socialist.

We are left wondering if we are expected to take Jesus literally and sell everything we have and give the money to the poor.

This story is less about generosity and more about our attitude toward our possessions. What we learn from this is that the more we acquire worldly and temporal things, the greater difficulty we see in the spiritual and eternal. Jesus makes his point about the burden of having material things in the exaggerated and absurd image of it being easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. Some biblical scholars believe that camel is a mistranslation and that Jesus was referring to a large rope.

In any case, it must be made clear that the rich young ruler is a not bad person. He does his best in trying to do the right thing in the best way he knows how. He is the modern equivalent of a yuppie trying to live the American dream of having it all. He has a Harvard MBA and earns an impressive salary well into six figures in a venture capital firm. He owns two SUV's and keeps his life organized on his lap top with a cell phone receiver tucked in his ear. He goes to his kids' hockey and soccer games and plays golf at the country club. They go off every weekend to their winter and summer vacation places. The children attend the best private schools and are sent off to sports camps in the summer. They belong to a church and attend when not away on weekends but if you ask he can't remember the priest's name. He may sign a pledge card but forgets to make good on it. He is never quite satisfied with his life because something is missing and he isn't sure what it is. He thinks he has fulfilled every ambition, yet he feels unfulfilled. The one thing he lacks is a sense of being a part of something larger than his own self interest and drive to have it all.

The current economic recession may have some positive consequences in helping us to realign our sense of values. We have been forced to reevaluate our priorities. We are the richest nation on earth, yet malnutrition and disease cause the death of thousands living in poverty everyday in many parts of the world.

For those of us who have what we need and want it is difficult for us to relate to those who go without. Life is more than a price to be bargained for, more than a commodity to be purchased. Our possessions cannot and will not provide self esteem or love, only a false sense of security. There is nothing wrong in itself with making money or having possessions; it is the inordinate love of these things that leads us astray. If we live for the sake of acquiring money and possessions, we are missing out on that which a price cannot be set. Money and possessions can impede reaching the heart of God because we can't set a price on what has real value. There comes a point where we have to come to terms with what comes between us and that which has

real value in our lives. This is all about the value we place on what we have and how we use them and about conserving and not wasting what we have.

If we are going to give of ourselves to God, we must do so wholeheartedly and generously. Giving only a portion of ourselves to God will not do. To unburden ourselves of our possessions, we have to ask the difficult question of whether we own them or if they own us. All we need to do is to take the time to see what we have to realize what we don't need or can't use that will be of benefit to others. For all of us, it is a matter of our attitude and what value we place on them.

I work at not letting things accumulate and enjoy giving taking things to the thrift shop that can be used by others. While I keep my doors locked and carry property insurance, I know that if I were to lose it all, I'd be all right. It wouldn't be the end of the world.

This was made real for me once when someone I knew had their home completely destroyed by fire right before their eyes. After the flames were extinguished and everything lay in ruins, I realized that they were not devastated. They were lucky to have gotten out alive. One of them found her confirmation certificate that had blown clear of the flames and took it as a sign that they would be all right. With the generosity of friends they were able to start all over again. They had the right attitude about what they had.

We all have to ask ourselves if we would be able to sustain a loss of everything we owned. The more we are able to do without, the better off we are. There is nothing wrong with money or possessions in themselves; it is the inordinate love and dependence on them that leads us astray. Many successful people are very generous in sharing what they have for the benefit of others who are modest and make no show of their generosity.

How about you? If you find that monetary concerns and material possessions impede having a better relationship with God, then it may be time to evaluate your value system and your perspective on what you have. Our relationship with God is our first priority. Our relationship with those we love is always more important than any material things because there can be no monetary value placed on them. The question we are asked today is whether we own our possessions or they own us. It's all in our understanding of how we use what God has given us.