

Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

I was going to talk to the kids about you know, do you ever want something really, really bad and how do you get it when you do want it. What does it take to get something you want? Well you guys know, what does it take? Money, a temper tantrum so that your husband gives it to you or your parents give in, right? Wives and husbands, do husbands throw temper tantrums? They do too, okay. We have to work for money, we have our credit cards, it costs something, doesn't it? So I was going to get the kids to talk about costs and what's expensive and how they get around that sort of thing, and then I was going to ask them what comes twice in the year where things you want you don't have to buy, but you still get them. Can you tell me what the two times in the year are when that happens? Birthdays and Christmas, cool, and you're able to say what you like. Now that the kids are not here we can tell our families, or our husbands and our wives, or our partners what we would like for Christmas. They're usually appreciative to know and they go get it and they give it to us as a gift. But do you know what I have discovered about Americans, I can say this because I am not born here, I was raised differently. Do you know what I can say about Americans, you're astoundingly generous. Given the right circumstances you really would give the shirt off your back. But do you know what your biggest problem is; you have a heck of a time receiving a free gift. My experience is you give something here to someone in America, this is a free gift, just as something, you like them and their really happy to receive it and the next minute you know you get a return gift in the mail.

There was a meeting just recently down in California, it was an anniversary meeting for people of Berkeley that had been burned out by a wildfire in 1991 and they were sitting around in a group talking and one lady said you know I had this beautiful porcelain vase and it was very expensive and I really loved it, but a young lady down the street was having a wedding and I just had to give her something really good so I gave her the porcelain vase. And after the fire, she came back to me, the lady's home had been burned to the ground, nothing but ash, and she gave her back the porcelain vase. And another woman said well, I gave away all the things I didn't like, and guess what, after the fire and everything we had was lost, we got all that bad stuff back again. But generally speaking we have trouble receiving a free gift. Now what's that got to do with what I am going to talk about?

Do you watch TV? Do you have Netflix? You go to the Blockbuster, what's happened, we're all dead here? Do you watch DVD's, VCR, right? You enjoy those sort of things? How many of you watched the movie called "The Mission?" You haven't seen "The Mission"? Then I am going to send you on a mission, on the way home stop at your favorite video and pick up "The Mission." It is a true story about Spanish Conquistadors and the Jesuit's in South America and they got into trouble with one another because the Conquistadors were exploiting the South American Native People and the environment and everything for the sake of business and the missionaries were in there trying to give these native people something to live for and part of the story goes. . .an older brother got into difficulties and his younger brother got into difficulties, there were terrible arguments and I believe the elder brother killed the younger brother. And in this fit of great remorse when he was thrown into a dungeon somewhere in South America, he

was burdened enormously by what he had done and he knew that somehow or other he had to make things right, but he didn't know how to do it.

Now in the gospel story what you've got is a man who comes up to Jesus and kneels before him and asks the question that we all ask. And the question is simply this, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life. In other words, what will I have to do so that when I die I will pass through whatever that death is and eventually finish up living in the Kingdom of God? What have I got to do to do that? That's his question. Darn it all, I bet it's a question we all have. We might think about it all that much, but when we're at someone's funeral we sure do, don't we? And what's the thing we think about when we're at someone's funeral? Don't we do some sort of moral arithmetic? Either this and that or the other thing and what's the preacher going to say, did he do anything good? Well was she right or wrong and at no time at all we're doing the bookkeeping thing, aren't we? We grew up bookkeeping, didn't we? Do you remember the first thing that happened to you in the first grade? The teacher came along and said this morning boys and girls we're going to have a little test. Do you remember that, and that was the beginning of nightmares for you for the whole of your school years. Isn't it, am I right or am I wrong? You're very quiet tonight. I had my nap just before the service.

Okay, so here we are, measuring ourselves all the time, aren't we? We're at work, someone's evaluating, did we do it right, did we do it wrong, did we do enough of it? Other people are looking at us and we wonder what they are thinking about us and of course the first thing we put into our heads is what we think is wrong with us and we put it into their heads, so we imagine it in their heads finding all the faults we find in ourselves, isn't that what we do? We're really keen to know how we measure up. And the scary thing is if we let ourselves start thinking about how we measure up with God, oops, maybe we just put that aside. Because, you know, isn't it true we've got hidden away in there the "biggies" that we did. I mean the real biggies, the biggies that we would die for if anybody knew about them. Huh? You don't have any of those in your life? I grew up in a seaport. I ran with a gang. Now you know why I am not preaching in my home town.

So we have this problem and Jesus looks at this young man and says, well you know, if you want to get into the Kingdom, he gives him the routine answer, remember the Ten Commandments. Do the Ten Commandments. And the man looks at him and said it with surprise; well I've done that ever since I was young. And you know that's probably true for all of us sitting here. I know you've done some biggies, and I've done them too, but we've tried and we're reasonably decent people aren't we? Hello? We're recently decent people, right? Pretty much like this man who's asking the question. And do you see what Jesus' reaction is. How does Jesus react to this man who says, since I've been a teenager I have been trying to live by this stuff. Jesus what... Jesus loves him, okay. He loves him. You know of course Jesus loves you, I know you have trouble believing it, but he does. Why, because you're his brother or sister. How can I say that? Because you're baptized. What does that mean? It means you've been adopted by God as his child. You see, God's loving you has nothing to do with what you've done. It has everything to do with what God's done. Okay. What God has done in Christ first. Ah, but then again we're Americans and we have so much trouble dealing with things that are given to us so freely.

So Jesus turns around to the young man and says okay, so you kept the commandments, look, here's what you've got to do. So you're in P3 and your Blackberry and your TV set and you're triple couch, go and sell your stuff and when you've sold it all, give the money that you raised to the poor and then when you've done that, come and follow me with the rest of the disciples. But he doesn't get to the end of that sentence. Do you notice how many times in scripture people are saying that Jesus doesn't get to the end of the sentence? Jesus says that terrible stuff is going to happen to me, I am going to be arrested, I am going to be dragged off, I am going to be tried, they're going to torture me and punish me and then they're going to kill me. And on the third day I arise again, but nobody gets to the third day I arise again, they're all so shocked out of their little gourds that all these terrible things are going to happen to Jesus. And here is this man who listens to what Jesus says and he's stuck on getting rid of all his possessions. But you see, Jesus isn't really talking about getting rid of his possessions, is he? What do you think that Jesus is really getting at? What he's asking the man is what in your life are you putting your trust in? It used to be 401K's didn't it? Their now 201K's, is that right. 101K's. What do you really put your trust in? What's the thing that if you didn't have you'd freak out about? You see what Jesus is saying to this man is for just my sake and your sake; give up trying to control everything. You know we get ulcers, easily. We stress ourselves silly, and we worry about things that we can't control. You know. Somehow or other when we go to the doctors someone or somehow we're going to pay for it and it doesn't matter how much congress fiddles with it, I don't imagine it is going to be that much better, it never is when they fix something, is it? And what do you know, finally our government has reached a budget, whoopee do . . . 101 days. If my representative asks how do I feel about the next election I'll tell them I have 101 reasons not to vote for you. We try to control things, we want to be in charge, and Jesus is saying, just let it go. Because, until you do, you can't let God give you the gift. The question is do we have the courage enough to trust him?

You know I told you about that guy, the conquistador lying in jail wondering what to do. He finally came up with an idea, and the Jesuits actually invited him to help them, isn't that something. An arch enemy of the Indians, a terrible guy, and the Jesuits themselves asked him to help and he agrees on one condition. And the condition is that he carries his burden. It's an incredible burden; it's a large rope knit filled with old items of armor, and helmets and swords and teapots and kettles, you name it, it's in there. It's an enormous pile, he staggers under its weight and to get into the area where the Indians are they have to climb this vertical waterfall. He won't let the Jesuits take the burden from him and the Jesuits just shake their head and say it's going to kill you, you know, you're nuts. And he gets almost to the top and he's right at the top and he's about to fall and a hand reaches out with a knife and slashes the ropes so that the burden falls off. And the hand is that of an Indian. A real gift of grace. Now, trust me on this. God has given all that he has so that you can be freed of the burden of worrying about how your life is going to end and where you're going to finish up. There is no promise that the roads going to be easy, there's no promise that there won't be awful suffering, but there is a promise that no matter what, you will not be on your own, that the presence of Christ is with you every step of the way. When you're afraid, tell him. When things are terrible, share it with him. When you can't figure out where to go next, ask him, trust him, it will be a scary ride, I can promise you that. But do you notice how the gospel ends. It talks about people giving up mothers and sister and brothers and cousins and aunts, sounds a bit like a Gilbert and Sullivan song.

Back in 1980 I left a teaching career at a University in Canada. I felt as though I couldn't stay in the job because I really felt as though I had been called to ministry. So, I gave up a nice job. When you gave up a luxury 26th floor apartment and we climbed into a Rider twenty-two foot truck crammed with our stuff and we drove to Gettysburg. I borrowed some money from PHEA, the Pennsylvania Higher Education Agency, I am sure you have heard of it, and Barb, bless her heart, went to work in a local bank. I left my home, I left my mother and father and my sister and all my relatives back in New Zealand and I found a new family. The last twenty years, I have been with you and do you know what, do you know what, you've blessed me. You have been here for me, you've been here with me and you've even let me know when I've screwed up. But you're there for me and you care about me and if that can happen to a seaport gang kid, who can't really show his face at home, then just imagine what can happen for you. The gift is yours for the taking. Amen.