

“Choice #2: Choose to Fill a Bucket”

(Mark 10: 17-22)

In my bucket this morning swirling and sloshing around from this past week are serendipitous moments of sacred joy. In my bucket is the sound of Olivia shouting out, “kiss, hug” racing toward me before I walk out the door in the morning. In my bucket is buying Ethan his first *Star Wars* action figure for his birthday (shhh, it’s a surprise). In my bucket is the sound of Gina and I laughing hysterically as our children look on with confusion as though we were from another planet and wondering what happened to their parents. In my bucket are the holy conversations that happened at our stewardship *Dessert First* meetings. In my bucket is finishing off the leftover M & Ms from those meetings (someone has to do it). In my bucket, is the overwhelming gratitude I felt on Monday afternoon when Jan Hay came into the sanctuary with the beautiful ‘tree of life’ quilt square hanging in front of you today. In my bucket is the indescribable grace of guiding our weekly Bible study and the Wednesday night forgiveness class that wrapped up last week. In my bucket is the joy of my parents visiting this weekend. In my bucket is the blessing of being your pastor.

It seems appropriate this time of year for us to peer into our buckets and take stock. Whether it is caused by the cool crispness of the autumn air, or our reflections are awoken out of the unmistakable aroma that waifs in the breeze carrying the smells of ovens being fired back up after the long summer hiatus to bake breads and pies combining with sweet smell of pumpkins and squash and apples. Or it might just be the visual sight of leaves falling and crunching beneath our feet; there is something, something, about this time of year that invites introspection. We take out our metaphorical buckets, count our blessings as the cliché goes, and look back. Just as the wind whips around us, creating a symphony of rustling leaves that serves as the soundtrack to autumn, so too I think there is also a stirring within us and restlessness as the days of another year start to dwindle.

We cannot be sure what kind of restlessness was swirling inside the rich man in those moments before he spotted Jesus. Maybe he was yearning for a deeper connection with God, after all we hear how he has kept the commandments from his youth and maybe playing by the rules wasn’t cutting it any longer. Maybe he got caught up in the moment, spotting Jesus off in the distance, knowing that if he hesitated he might never have the chance to ask Jesus how he could grasp onto life that is truly life. Maybe he had been roaming around his home, looking at his possessions, and felt some emptiness, longing, rattling within. Whatever it was that prompted the man to run up to Jesus, he leapt at the chance to talk to him.

Now, our familiarity with this passage and our own cultural baggage about wealth as immortalized in Ebenezer Scrooge creates a kind of spiritual earwax when we try to hear and think about these words. We carry with us presuppositions about this man that cloud our ability to receive each word of the lesson. Or we end up holding this text at arms length (as far away as possible), offering it up to the Bill Gates of the world with judgment and a sigh of relief that it’s a good thing Jesus isn’t talking about or to us in this passage. But, friends, for perhaps too long we’ve made three crucial mistakes with this part of our gospel. First, we’ve missed that Jesus, who is a really good judge of character and calls people out when their true intentions are hidden behind loaded questions, has love for this rich man. Jesus senses sincerity and genuineness about the rich man. Why have we sometimes not afforded the same kind of compassion for him? Why have we been suspect of his motives, when Jesus answers his

question about life that is true life with an openness and honesty that challenges both him and us, all of us, here today?

But, you might counter, what about the end of the passage. We hear how the rich man went away grieving, troubled by the challenging cost of discipleship and doing a mental inventory of all his possessions. Surely since we know the end of the story that casts a shadow on the first part; which brings me to the second place we might want to pause and ponder and reconsider our interaction with this passage. Namely, we **don't really know the end, the true end of the story**. What if, two days later have wrestling with what Jesus had asked, he went out and put a for sale sign in his yard and held a huge garage sale? What if, five weeks later, he started slowly letting go of the tight grasp he had on his possessions? What if, twenty years later, those words of Jesus that had roamed around his head and heart for so long finally sunk in and he did what Jesus invited him to do? We don't have the sequel to the rich man's story. The camera will stay focused on Jesus as he trudges down the road that leads to Jerusalem, to a cross, and to a new life that still has power to change our lives today. The rich man wanders off stage left grieving. But to be honest, if I linger with him, if I slide my feet into his sandals for just a moment, if Jesus happens to ring the door bell on Monday morning to chat with me and ask the same thing, 'Wes sell **all your** possessions, give the money to the poor and come, follow me!' Friends, the reality is I would be heartbroken as well. I'd want to argue, 'Jesus, you don't understand, I've got a family and a mortgage and bills and the "x" on our computer is broke and makes it really hard for me to sign into my email account.'

As I think about all the good reasons why I don't want to slip on the rich man's sandals, it brings me to the third miscue in ways we've approached Jesus' words. Namely, I think we all squirm a bit in the pew with uncomfortableness at Jesus' challenge. We want to contextualize the story by saying Jesus did not ask every wealthy person to give his or her money away, look at Zacchaeus, the wee little man. Or we rationalize the story by saying that it's not about the size of our bank account, it's what we do with it. Or we might even find ourselves scanning the congregation to find someone, anyone who is richer than we are so that the spotlight might fall to someone else first. The reality is this passage takes us to a place of vulnerability, this passage challenges us and even offends us. But when we are done wrestling with Jesus' words, when we feel exhausted, and sit there trying to catch our breath, I think this passage invites us to make the conscious choice about how we can fill another person's bucket.

You see, we may have smiled at the simplicity of the suggestions in the book I read to the children today, but the honest truth is that as adults we struggle mightily with thinking that if I share something of mine with someone else, even if its love or kindness or especially if it is money, **I will have less**. To choose to fill a bucket means that we will seek out ways to share love, kindness, grace, peace, joy, time, talent and treasure in a world that will be suspicious of our motives and often taken aback. To choose to fill a bucket means that we depend upon the spirit's guidance calling us to share our gifts and our light with others even when some see our acts of generosity as foolish. To choose to fill a bucket means that we leap into action trusting in the grace of God. To choose to fill a bucket means that we wake up each morning, wipe the sleep from our eyes, choose today and then choose to live generously, lovingly, and let God guide our response. To choose to fill a bucket is exactly what we need to ponder prayerfully on the heels of our Dessert First meetings. So, this morning, I offer you not an intention of giving card, not a survey of where you will serve in 2010, I offer you as we move deeper into this stewardship season the image of a bucket to take with you. In fact, I invite you to find a bucket in your house today and place somewhere visible in your house. Perhaps on your dinning room table (that will be a conversation starter when company comes over) or if you want to be more

conspicuous you could put a bucket on your nightstand. And then each night in some way ask yourself: who filled my bucket and whose bucket did I fill today? Choose to fill a bucket; for that might just be the best way we can be stewards in this world today. Choose to fill a bucket, because friends it is what our faith invites us and yearns to be about. Choose to fill a bucket, that is the second choice we face each day. Choosing to fill a bucket is about our actions, how we move about our day, how we share our light and lives with others. Friends, choose to fill a bucket this week and give thanks for those in this church, in our lives, and in this community who choose to fill our buckets each day.

Thanks be to God. And let the people of God say, "Amen!"