



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: October 14, 2018**

**Sermon Title: "Come Follow Me"**

**Sermon Text: Mark 10:17-27**

Today's Gospel has challenged and frustrated Christians for centuries. We've struggled through the ages to make sense of it. At first glance, the young man in today's Gospel seems to have so many of his spiritual ducks in order. He has kept all of the commandments since his youth. How many of us can say the same thing? He seems like the perfect candidate to be a follower of Jesus.

And yet at the end of the story, the young man walks away shocked and grieving. If we're honest with ourselves, there is a piece of us that is both repelled and terrified by the story's outcome. We are repelled because it feels like Jesus is making an unfair and unrealistic demand upon this young man. Why must *he* sell everything he possesses and give the money away to the poor? Who else in Holy Scripture was faced with that kind of radical ultimatum? I can't think of a single person on whom that demand was placed. Even someone like Zacchaeus – the "wee little man in the sycamore tree" who by his own admission was a cheat and a fraud – even Zacchaeus didn't have to sell *everything* and give *everything* away. How could *anyone* reasonably do that?

And that's the reason this story terrifies us. Because if the price of admission to heaven is that we have to sell all of our stuff and give the money away, then very few of us are going to be able and willing to pay that price. Maybe none of us can pay such a steep price.

So maybe this story really is about money and nothing but money. But I think it's about something even bigger than that. So let's try to glean that "something bigger" by taking money out of the equation for a moment. I'll do this by sharing three simple mini-stories with you, all of which we will relate to the rich young man and then to ourselves.

The first story happened while I was on seminary internship in Butler, Pennsylvania. We had rented an interesting little home a mile or two from the church. It was a Montgomery Ward house that had been ordered from a catalog back in the 40's, delivered in boxcars, and assembled from instructions. It was a terrific little place with just one flaw: the stairs to the second floor were ridiculously steep, almost like climbing a ladder.

Just walking up and down the stairs wasn't a big deal. But the steepness became a significant problem during move-in. The problems began when friends who were helping us unload began hauling the box spring up the steps to the second floor master bedroom. Unfortunately, the box springs were stiff and inflexible and the stairway so steep that the box springs quickly became lodged in the doorway. Before I could advise my helpers to ease-off,

they pushed, strained, and crammed the box springs through that too-small space and up the steps. As a result, the box springs were a mess. With hammer, nails, and staples, I was able to patch everything together enough to get through the year. But I knew those box springs would never make it back down the steps when it was time to move back to seminary, and I knew I couldn't just leave them behind. So when moving day came, I took a power saw to the box springs, cut it into pieces, easily brought the individual parts down the steps, and tossed them into a dumpster. The moral of story #1: sometimes you have to eliminate a thing in your life if you're going to move on to the next chapter.

Story #2: When Emilio was a little boy, he loved to play on the playground. We would be there for hours and hours. He especially liked sliding boards. He fearlessly climbed the ladder, all the way to the top of very big sliding boards. At the top, he would carefully get in position, ready to zoom down the slide. Once in a while though, sitting there at the top, it would dawn on him how high he was. He'd get scared and hold on for dear life. We'd coach him and encourage him, even as kids lined up behind him. He would inch a little down the slide, but still cling white-knuckled to the top railing, his body dangling, as he tried to muster the courage to let go. Eventually, with great distress he would finally let go or we'd pry his hands loose, and at the bottom he would stand up with a big, happy pumpkin grin, as if nothing had happened. The moral of story #2: Sometimes you have to let go in order to experience something in its joyful fullness.

Last story, story #3: This is a hypothetical story, so use your imagination for this one. Imagine you've just arrived back home after grocery shopping. You've unloaded the car and your arms are filled with groceries: eggs, tomatoes, all sorts of wonderful things you'll need for the unforgettable supper you've planned to make. While slowly making your way from the driveway to your house, your neighbor walks over to visit. She's carrying her two-week old baby. You pause for a moment to say hello. But as your neighbor approaches you, she slips on a slick spot on the driveway. Her feet give way. She loses her grip on the baby. The baby is hurtling through the air. With less than a split second to think it all through, you instinctively drop all your groceries and catch the baby before he can hit the ground. The baby is safe. But your eggs and your produce are ruined. The moral of story #3: sometimes you need to drop something *good* in order to cling to something *great*.

I'm sure the rich young man in today's Gospel was a fine person. After all, he's the only person in all of Mark's Gospel whom Mark explicitly identifies as being loved by Jesus. Jesus wasn't trying to be mean or unfair to the young man. In fact I believe it was love that enabled Jesus to recognize that the young man was going to struggle to pick up a cross and follow Jesus, because the man's hands were too full of other things. Yes, it might have been that he was overly attached to his wealth. But it's just as likely the young man was addicted to the power his wealth brought, or the acclaim and praise the young man received from those who were less prosperous – those who needed to curry his favor.

I don't believe the young man knew and loved *Jesus* with the same depth that Jesus knew and loved the *young man*. This is evident from the young man's works-based language. When he calls Jesus "good teacher" he is focused on Jesus's good works rather than Jesus's identity as the Son of God. The young man is also fixated on his *own* good works, as he brags how he has

kept the commandments and asks what he must “do” to inherit eternal life. His hands are so very full and overburdened that there’s scarcely any room left for Jesus.

But sometimes you have to eliminate a thing in your life if you’re going to move on to the next chapter. Sometimes you have to let go in order to experience something in its fullness. And sometimes you need to drop something *good* in order to cling to something *great*.

What’s holding you back from truly knowing and loving Jesus? Can you let it go so that you can *walk* with Jesus and *fall in love* with Jesus? You don’t have to work your way to heaven. But why would you even want to be there if you weren’t head over heels in love with Jesus? Our calling is to love. Jesus will handle the details. Nothing is impossible for him. This is really more about *trust* than *money*. Can you put your trust in Jesus? He’s looking at you lovingly and he’s saying, “Come follow me.” What’s holding you back from fully loving him and fully committing to a life of Christian discipleship? Whatever it is, eliminate it. Let it go. Drop what is merely *good* for that which is truly *great*. Jesus is calling. Fall in love, and just see where he leads you. Amen.