



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

JESUS THE ZEN MASTER

Sermon for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2015

Readings: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Mark 10:17-31

Sermon text: 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.” When he heard this he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Today we have stories of two rich men. One is Job, who loses everything—and wants to know why. We will look at his story next week. The other is nameless, but usually referred to as the Rich Young Man. Despite all his “many possessions” he still “lacks one thing,” according to Jesus.

What is this one thing he lacks?

You might think it is “treasure in heaven,” for Jesus tells him to “sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Charitable giving in this life will earn heavenly interest in the next—eternal treasure that won’t rust or be counted against you (compare Matthew 6:19-20; James 5:3).

Or maybe it is a “good teacher” he lacks. And that’s why he comes and kneels before Jesus—and think of that for a moment. A wealthy and high status man encounters Jesus, an itinerant preacher and healer, who is “setting out on a journey,” and the man runs up and kneels before him with the urgent question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He thinks Jesus has the key to eternal life.

Jesus reminds him that he is not God—not at least in the sense the man understands—and only God is truly good, able to give such a good as eternal life.

Jesus tests to see if he keeps the Ten Commandments. He does. But still he lacks one thing.

Not possessions, even eternal ones. Not teachers. There was Jesus right in front of him, the greatest teacher the world has known.

He lacks one thing: *freedom*. The freedom to follow the call of God, the call of Jesus to “come, follow me.”

He is burdened and barred from entering the kingdom. Jesus compares him to a beast of burden trying to get through a narrow opening. No way the camel is getting through, either the eye of a tailor’s needle or a gate to the city of Jerusalem by that name (so I have heard the parable explained). He can’t let go of the thing which holds him back from entering the kingdom of God—not in the afterlife but right now. The kingdom of God that is *right here right now* available to us: the kingdom within, the kingdom all around.

What is this kingdom and how can we enter it?

Or maybe the question should be, what is stopping us from seeing the kingdom and entering into it right now?

Possessions are not the only barrier. Jesus did not teach that money or other possessions are bad in themselves and must all be given away to the poor. After all, in his exchange with the tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), Jesus sees him in the tree (he was a short man) and asks to stay at his house. The crowd is incredulous that Jesus would stay with such a notorious sinner. But in response, Zacchaeus promises to give half of his wealth to the poor, and restore fourfold any money he may have gotten unethically (Luke 19:1-10). Presumably, it is fine that he hold on to the remainder and his house and keep working, but honestly, while also stocking up some treasure in heaven. Similarly Paul tells the people in his churches to keep at their honest work, but for soldiers not to bully, for officials not to take bribes and so on. He himself insisted on working as a tent-maker so none would think he was preaching the gospel for money. Some Christian saints—such as St Anthony of the desert and St Francis of Assisi—gave up everything and followed Jesus’ advice to the rich man to the letter, embracing lady poverty and practicing extreme asceticism. But not all are called to this life. After all, once again, the point is not be poor but to be free, to be able to perceive and enter the kingdom of God. That takes practice—which is the meaning of the Greek word *askesis*.

What practices will help free you to follow Jesus and be part of the kingdom of heaven?

Let’s take a look at practices from a completely different religious tradition. In *Chan* (Japanese *Zen*) Buddhism, the emphasis is on liberating one’s mind by insight into the nature of reality. Reality is not body or mind but both; it is not out there or in here—it is everywhere and nowhere. It is the dynamic play of an interlocking, interdependent system of principles realized in practice. We naively think things are real—and learn they are *really* atoms colliding in empty space, energy patterns crystallized in matter. Then we think this solid world is an illusion (*maya*); we are naively projecting ideas onto a canvas of chaos. Again we are wrong, grasping too eagerly at understanding. But enlightenment can come suddenly: now we see (so the disciple smiled when the Buddha held up a flower).

As one Zen master put it (as reported by D.T. Suzuki): “When I began the study of Zen, mountains were mountain and rivers were rivers. When I began to understand, I saw that mountains were not mountains and rivers were not rivers. But now, after thirty years of practice, I see that mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.”

Just so, Jesus told his disciples, if you give up everything—family, house, fields—for the sake of the gospel—you will receive back again a

hundredfold—family, friends, fields. With persecutions.

There is the kingdom. It is right in front of you. Can you lay down the burdens that stop you? Can you give up the mindset of possessions and mastery and control? Can you take the yoke of Christ and be free?

Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. He looks at us too—and loves us too, each one of us. To each of us he has a unique message—for we all have different gifts and different burdens. But the call is one: come, follow me. Enter the kingdom of God. and there you will have all that you have now, all that you give up to follow, all will be returned a hundredfold—with persecutions. And eternal life—the mind of Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Let the people say, Amen.

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