

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 10, 2021 – PENTECOST 20 / PROPER 23B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *“Let it go!”*

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 (Seek the Lord and live; hate evil; love goodness)
Psalm 90:12-17 (A prayer for wisdom and long life)
Hebrews 4:12-26 (God's Word is living and active, sharp as a sword)
St. Mark 10:17-27 (Get rid of, let go of, surrender whatever keeps you from following Jesus)

The late Father John Claypool, a well-known and much-beloved Episcopal priest and author,¹ told the story of two Buddhist monks who were walking in a thunderstorm. They came to a stream so swollen it was nearly overflowing its banks. A beautiful young woman dressed in a kimono stood there wanting to cross to the other side, but she was afraid of the strong currents.

One of the monks said, “Can I help you?” The woman replied, “I need to cross the stream.” So the monk picked her up, laid her over his shoulder, carried her through the swirling waters, and gently put her down on the other side. Then he and his companion continued on toward their monastery.

Later that night, the monk's companion said to him, “Look, I have a bone to pick with you. As Buddhist monks, we have taken vows not to even look at a woman, much less touch her body. Back there at the river, you did both.” “My brother,” answered the other monk, “I put that woman down on the other side and left her there. You are still carrying her in your mind.”²

Hmm ... What burdens are we still carrying in our minds—emotional baggage, memories that torment us, worn-out excuses, denials, and self-loathing—that are keeping us from a closer relationship with Christ?

In today's Gospel story, Jesus encounters a young man who not only has every material thing, but also, he is super-righteous. So what's the problem? Does Jesus begrudge people having stuff, or is He against a really good person obeying all the commandments? Well ... no, if owning possessions and being faithful to God's law aren't the be-all and end-all of our lives. On the other hand, if we think the possessions for which we have worked so hard, or all the good we do, will get us into heaven or improve our relationship with Christ, He informs us we are greatly mistaken.

There's an old joke, “How much money did Rockefeller have when he died?” The answer is, “None,” because once we're dead, we have nothing at all—except our eternal soul, and the God who made us. You've also probably heard the one about how you won't ever see a U-Haul trailer hitched to the back of a hearse. Jesus is gently trying to teach both His disciples and us that we need to let go of everything and anything—at least in our minds and hearts, if not in our concrete daily lives—that may be hampering a closer knowledge of, and love for, Christ.

My maternal grandmother took this Gospel passage literally. After raising two children, she hoped to become a missionary nurse, but failing health prevented Grandma from realizing her chosen vocation. This disappointment cast her back upon the Lord, and out of her total devotion to Jesus, she chucked her college-educated, comfortable suburban life, sold everything she had, and went to work for a Black family as their live-in housekeeper. My racist, upper-class family was shocked beyond belief, and kept pestering Grandma's employers to release her, as though she had been kidnapped and was being held against her will. But I remember visiting Grandma at their home, and seeing how happy and content she was, owning nothing of her own, just living in the room they provided in exchange for her service to the household.

Now, I admit, this was a rather extreme form of discipleship for a 20th-century lady from an estate in Stephen's City, Virginia. And I don't think Jesus is calling many of us to live such lives of sacrificial simplicity and humility. As I said last Sunday, we can't all be like St. Francis. On the other hand, Grandma was onto something. She understood in the depth of her being that all she truly had in this life was Christ.

Along with St. Paul, she was able to say as he did in Philippians 3:8, “Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ.”

Wow! Everything except knowing Jesus is “garbage”?! And what do we do with garbage? *We throw it out, we get rid of it, we dump it, we let it go!* When we hang onto it, *it stinks!!*

So, back to my original question: “What might you be holding on to, what are you having difficulty dumping, letting go of, that’s getting in the way of a deeper, more vital, more energizing and peaceful relationship with Jesus?”

One way to answer that question is, take an inventory of where your mind tends to go. We talked last week about gazing at, or meditating upon, an image, such that we tend to *become* what we *consume*, visually, emotionally, and physically. Do you spend a lot of time thinking about the past, stuck in regrets, or grieving? Or, do your thoughts wander too much toward the future, tending toward worry, or imagining numerous what-if scenarios? It’s been said that one reason God identified Himself to Moses as “I am,” is that all we truly have is this present moment in which we are, and God is. It’s also been said that *now* is called “the present” because it is “a gift.”

If we are not to wallow in old memories, or fixate on the unknowable future, how do we continually and happily live in the present, and more importantly, in the presence of God? We do it through trusting Him with every moment of our lives.

Ah, now that’s the hard part. And I would venture that’s why the rich young man in today’s Gospel couldn’t seem to manage giving up what He had to follow Jesus. It is our human nature, that whenever we surrender something, we tend to want something else in return. We don’t like to let go without a safety net or an insurance policy. But if we really think about it, what or whom can we trust more than Jesus? Nothing and no one!

People will inevitably let us down. Banks and companies fail by the dozens, daily. The value of the almighty dollar fluctuates insanely. The stuff we have breaks, wears out, spoils, falls apart, gets lost, or needs an upgrade. So far, in less than two years’ time, things in our life that unexpectedly had to be replaced included: Both our cell phones; my car; our washer/dryer; the air-conditioning unit and thermostat; the wall-mounted microwave oven; electric tea kettle; toaster oven; coffee maker; waffle iron; blender; electric shaver; computer monitor and keyboard; *and* a toilet seat!

I mean, *get real!* This world and everything in it is passing away, and we will take absolutely nothing out of it except ourselves. And, if we are fortunate and blessed, that self will leave planet earth in the arms of our loving Lord, accompanied by His glorious angels, and serenaded by the choirs of heaven. Compared to that, who needs the junk we store in our minds, the baggage with which we burden our psyches, or all the odds and ends we accumulate in our homes?

If we can’t let go of things without trusting God, and we’re having a hard time with trust issues, it may come down to simply saying as St. Faustina did: “Jesus, I trust in You.” And saying that over, and over, and over, and over, until it becomes a commitment of your will, not necessarily a *feeling* in your heart. On the ring I wear on my right pinky finger is written “Jesus, I trust in You,” and because it’s one ring on top of the other, the one with the words can be turned repeatedly, as I try to pray those words when my worries or anxiety start to get in the way of my closeness to Christ.

Jesus is challenging every one of us to seriously consider what we can let go of in our hearts, minds, and lives, as well as in our houses, garages, and storage sheds—so that not only can we be liberated to focus more of our energy on Christ and His will for our lives, but so that we might also generously part with some of our things and give them to those who are in need.

In Psalm 73:25, the psalmist addresses God, saying: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.” Indeed! May the Lord give us the grace to see the psalmist’s wisdom in all that think, say, and do, in the days ahead. Amen.

¹ “The Rev. Dr. John R. Claypool, IV,” [Day1.org](http://day1.org/193-the_rev_dr_john_claypool/) <http://day1.org/193-the_rev_dr_john_claypool/> October 13, 2012.

² Adapt. John Claypool, “The Future and Forgetting,” [Preaching Today](http://www.higherpraise.com/preachingtoday/), Tape No. 109, [HigherPraise.com](http://www.higherpraise.com)
<http://www.higherpraise.com/outlines/new%20testament/phil3_13-14.htm> 1 January 2011.