



*How Many Pairs of Shoes Do You Own?*

*Mark 10:17-31*

*Sunday, October 14th, 2018 ~ 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

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Text: *“At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.”* (vs. 22)

How many pairs of shoes do you own? Stop and think about it for a second or two. As I do a mental count, I have a pair of running shoes, a pair of black wingtips for dress and bagpiping, a pair of black oxfords, old gardening and mowing shoes, black klogs for home visits--they're easy to get on and off while at the same time looking at least a little “dressy”, tap dance and jazz shoes (yes, I take weekly lessons), brown dress oxfords, a yellow pair of “Chuck Taylors” from a daughter's wedding, and light brown canvas for “dressy” casual wear for when my running shoes just wouldn't do. Those are the ones that readily come to mind. How about you? How many pairs of shoes do you own? My list is a little embarrassing. After all, how many pairs of shoes do we *really* need? *We only have two feet! For that matter, how you ever wondered, “How much is enough?”*

A line in the movie *Fight Club* had one of the characters saying, *“The things you own end up owning you. It is only after you lose everything that you're free to do anything.”*

In today's lesson a man approached Jesus. I find it most interesting that in Mark's gospel it's a “man”; not a “rich man” as you find in Matthew's gospel or a “rich young ruler” as you would find in Luke's gospel, but just “a man”. The gospel writers were neither accidental nor biographical in their stories about Jesus. They were intentional and theological. I believe that Mark intended his readers--people like you and me--to see themselves in this particular story. He intended for us to see ourselves as “the man” who approached Jesus unsure of our relationship with God. Like the “man” we too often wonder if we've “done enough” or are “good enough”. Too often we are insecure in our relationship with God.

At one level we hope that God “grades” on the curve because we know that we are not perfect but we know that we are better than “him” or “her”, whoever “him” or “her” may be. As a colleague of mine is fond of saying, “Chief of sinners though I be, ‘Frosty’ is worse than me!” You can replace “Frosty” with whomever you wish to compare yourself to.

At another level, though, we are afraid, and perhaps know, that God does not grade on the curve.

In today's lesson we are told that Jesus "loved" the man. Once again, Mark is very intentional in the word that he chose for "love". The "love" expressed here is the God-like love that summons us to our very highest self. In other words, it appeals to our better angels and calls us to be "all that we can be". It challenges us into hard conversations. It challenges our priorities and securities lest we succumb to the temptation of putting some other god before the God who will have no other gods before him; the God Who is the Creator of the ends of the earth, of all that was, and is, and will be.

The man could not live up to this love because, we are told, he had a great many possessions; things.

One the cover of today's bulletin is a quotation by the Rev. Magrey deVega.

*"Jesus knew that one's relationship with money is, for many people, the greatest obstacle to living a life of full commitment and faithfulness. ... Whether we like it or not, what we own has a tendency to define, or at least influence, who we are."*

There is a theological and what some would call a "practical" reason to participate in a church stewardship campaign. I don't like this division of "theological" and "practical" because at a very basic level, all of life's decisions are "theological" in so far as they reveal to us our true values--what we hold important as reflected in our priorities.

Now, I know that there are some--my father was one of them in his younger days--who think that ministers do not live in the real world, that they are too "ivory tower-ish", and should never talk about money because they may be seen as "feathering their own nest". There are some who believe that ministers are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. But, with the exception of the Kingdom of God, Jesus talked about money and possessions more than any other subject including prayer.

I remember an old elder in a church I served years ago. I was much younger then and my daughters were small. On a Sunday morning she stopped me in the church kitchen and said, "Listen, don't be afraid to talk to people about money. Volunteering is fine, but volunteering will not pay the bills, and it will not support mission. So don't be afraid to talk about people's giving." Taking her words to heart, I have never hesitated to talk about money.

So, stewardship--theologically and practically.

On a practical level, I long believed that the church is like a Boeing 747, the most common commercial airplane. The building is but the shell of the plane, The four engines that enable a church to get off of the ground and fly are Worship, Mission, Fellowship and Education. These are the same hallmarks of the Early Church listed in the New Testament of Acts 2:42. The money that we give is the jet fuel the feeds the engines. A church can only fly as high as the financial support of its members and friends.

On a theological level, well Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. once wrote, "There is a little plant called Reverence in the corner of my soul's garden, which I love to have watered once a week". The spiritual habit of setting aside of our "first-fruits", a percentage of our income--not from the "left-overs", to do the work of God through the hands of this congregation is one of the ways that we water that little plant called "Reverence".

Shortly after I arrived here a member, who is no longer with us, would take me to lunch about three or four times a year. At some point during the lunch he would pass an envelope across the table to me. The first couple of times I felt kind of like a mob “hit-man”. The envelope would contain a large check. Once day I thanked him for his generous support of the ministry of First Federated Church, and he promptly corrected me. He said, “I’m not generous. I didn’t have to give anything up. I can do everything that I want to do. Being generous means that I have to sacrifice, that I have to give something up, something that I want to have or do. No, I’m not being generous, at all.”

I was stunned not only by what he said but by the depth of his theology.

So, if you are asking yourself, “How shall I participate in this year’s stewardship campaign? How much should I give?” Be relieved to know that I cannot answer that question for you. I can tell you what Sue and I give to the on-going ministry of First Federated Church, but I can’t answer that question for you. What I can do is to remind you to “*Count your blessings,*” and *prayerfully ask God that question posed by the prophet of old, “With what shall I return to the Lord for his favor to me.”*

To God be the glory. Amen.