

Stewardship Kaleidoscope Closing Worship
September 25, 2018
Romans 12: 1-2
Matthew 19: 16-26

Editor's note: Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia was the Worship leader at Stewardship Kaleidoscope 2018 in St. Louis. She preached the sermon below during closing worship. The sermon below is her original material and should only be used or reprinted with attribution.

We've traded the anxiety and dominance of Pharaoh for the Roman Empire.

Not much has changed from Genesis to the passage for this morning in the Gospel of Matthew. The rich are still getting richer, social status reigns supreme, and the Jewish leaders have made concessions so that they can freely practice their faith while living in the boundaries of this oppressive empire. Though the religious leaders were doing what they could to allow their faith tradition to survive in the midst of the empire's own deities, they were losing the foundations of their beliefs in the process. They were in the midst of the struggle to be in the world but not of it.

The man in the story for today would have appeared, from the outside, to have it altogether. This is no simple list of commandments that he has maintained throughout his life! Despite the pressures of the political world, he's been able to keep this holy to-do list well...or so he says. I imagine that he has quite a few admirers who observe his ability to be holy while surrounded by the tangible wealth of this world. So without hesitation, he approaches Jesus and asks "what good deed" he must do to gain eternal life.

"What must I *do*?" he asks eagerly having accomplished the marks of holiness and respect from the people around him.

The response he receives is the goodness and richness of the commandments written as a reminder of the Hebrew's escape from the oppressive clutches of Pharaoh to the freedom of the wilderness. Remember that the journey through the wilderness was no easy feat, either for the people or Moses! The familiar comforts of Pharaoh's regime were no longer present: under his rule, the people knew what was required. Endless brickmaking day after day without breaking for rest, all while surrounded by the watchful eyes of men sent to enforce their enslavement. At least there, they knew the work of their hands and the source of their food. They knew what was required for them to *do* and *be* in the Egyptian world. But in the wilderness? The familiarity of oppression was enough of a routine for them to yearn for the food of Egypt rather than the taste of freedom. Surely in those early years, Pharaoh continued to control the people as they struggled to follow the God who had let them out of captivity in the first place.

"Done!" the man says with eagerness. Full of youth, he declares that he's kept these commandments and loved his neighbor. "What else do I lack?"

"If you wish to be perfect," Jesus said, "Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (v. 21)

It's his stuff that keeps him from willingly accepting Jesus' invitation to "Come and follow me." (Remember, this is the same phrase that Jesus uses to call the disciples in the early part of the gospel.) He can't fathom a world where he isn't measured by the things he owns and the ways that these solidify his seat at each banquet or even the respect and awe

of others as he walks along the street. He seemingly wants to have it all: the rule abiding faith full of religious to-dos and the wealth of this world in his pockets. Downcast, he leaves the Messiah with a heavy heart that salvation might not be attainable for him.

I wonder how many other people in earshot walked away, too?!

Treasure in heaven just doesn't sound as appealing as treasure here on earth.

Opening Video for reflection: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNzXze5Yza8>

That's it, isn't it? The American dream put right into our faces as a man walks around his home fitted with a backyard pool, modern décor, and a running monologue that allow us just enough insight into his life to see that his abode is more than modestly sized. His narrative exudes the American prowess rooted in a history where no land is off limits and no goal is unattainable. We're told indirectly and directly that the American dream is real and, if we just work hard enough, we can have it all too. We just need to keep doing, making, creating, and producing to show our worth, both to those around us, *but also to ourselves*.

This is the heart of the challenge for us today: How can we avoid the transactional nature imposed by the societal norms around us so that we are free for a relationship with the divine? In a context where the Pharaohs of the world tell us constantly to make more and more, rest less and less, and work to earn our value, can we turn our backs on accumulating wealth for relationship with the Triune God? How can we remember to lift up our hands in recognition of the One who created them, who made our whole being, in the first place?

It seems like the ideal, faithful approach and yet the reality of life while we are on this earth if we let every thing go...well, it feels like a punishment no matter how much treasure we may be storing in heaven. Now, right in our hands, feels much more comforting.

In reality, I do not believe that the rich man had kept all of the commandments as he said. He so quickly blurts out that he has loved others as he loves himself. And yet, he cannot let go of his worldly possessions that, in their exchange within the market, would serve the neighbors around him. He has yet to fully realize what it means to be reliant on the community by realizing that each individual, including himself and those not even in the periphery of his daily vision, are all a part of the larger system. By holding onto his earthly riches, this man is keeping access of even the most basic of needs from others.

Though he couldn't name it when he approached Jesus, there is something that the rich man knows he is missing. Biblical scholar and Lutheran pastor, David Lose, puts it this way: "So what if this guy isn't just pious but sick, heart sick, and somewhere deep down he knows this and so seeks out Jesus with his question about heavenly entrance exams because he knows that whatever his appearance on the outside, whatever his faithful and pious life, he's still missing something, something important, something that matters, something that's a matter of life and death. If this is the case, then maybe Jesus really does love him. Maybe Jesus sees that all this guy has – his knowledge of the law, his perfect piety, his abundant wealth – has distorted his sense of himself, and of God, and of his neighbor. And so maybe Jesus tells him to divest so that he can really live by faith in God and in solidarity with neighbor for the first time in his life, which would be like having, when you think about it, treasure in heaven." (*In the Meantime*, 2015)

Jesus certainly challenged the people around him to think about the world in a completely different way. His whole ministry was about overturning the social and political norms of the day. He knew that religious laws were not enough to transform the actions of the people trying to be faithful Jews around him. Check lists do not make a deep, life-changing faith in anyone. He knew that this work was about mind, heart, body and soul.

The freedom Jesus called people to exercise is exactly what led the political and religious leaders to conspire together against him. His words to overturn the political, social and religious world order of the day led to his crucifixion and death. Jesus was calling people to freedom from the clutches of the world, the same hypnotizing chorus that echoes for us today: the myth that the work of our hands drives our success and rise in power, the money in our bank accounts provides security, and our social position is what impacts our ability to make a difference. All of this was far too radical...Jesus had to go.

What we don't often talk about is that the freedom Jesus calls us to exercise, the call to be countercultural and in the world but not of it, all of it often leads to death for us, too: Death of what we are told day in and day out are the things we should value.

Death of the narrative that our relentless work ethic is our value.

Death to recognition and popularity contests.

Death of self-centeredness and individualism.

Death of our own needs placed before the needs of others.

Death so that we can *live*.

The first step toward transforming our sin-sick, weary souls is to do exactly what the rich young man tried to do that day so long ago: Run up to Jesus, fall to our knees, and expose the reality that are missing something. We must confess that the work of our hands has not brought us fulfillment or wholeness. We have to proclaim what our hands are grasping onto, that security blanket that keeps us reliant on what we do and make rather than the freely given, grace-filled love of God.

So here's the first step in that direction for each one of us in worship today: You were given a piece of paper when you walked into worship today. I want you to take a moment to write down what is keeping you from embracing Christ's call when he says, "Come and follow me." When you hear those words, what sends your heart pounding and makes you hesitate from freely responding? Write what you need to confess or let go of on the paper.

In her first presentation, Diana Butler Bass said, "The brain cannot be in a state of gratitude and a state of fear at the same time. Gratitude stops fear."

The rich man's fear of what he would lose took over his ability to respond to the Jesus' invitation when he said simply, "Come and follow me." He let this fear take over the freely offered grace in those four words. He just couldn't do it.

As the disciples watch the man walk away, they turn to Jesus and ask, "Who, then, can be saved?"

And Jesus' response is blunt. "No one. No mortal. It's impossible."

Then in the same breath, he declares, "But nothing is impossible for God!"

These words and phrases that you wrote on your pieces of paper, the weights that keep you standing still rather than running toward Christ, they're wrapped up in fear and reliance of self. They're tied to this world and the ways that we're all told to how measure our worth. Until we figure out how to let them go, we're captive to the oppressive forces around us rather than the freedom of God's grace. We're not disciples, we're settling to be

just like the rich man ticking off the holy to-do list and going right back to the ways of the world when we step out of our sanctuary walls.

And if we can't let go, then we can't ask people to give anything of themselves, financial or otherwise.

Only you can decide what happens next: gratitude or fear.

"Nothing is impossible with God."

May it be so.

Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia is an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She earned her undergraduate degree at Rutgers University and M.Div. at Princeton Theological Seminary. Larissa's ministry started with a pastoral residency program at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia, PA. It was there that she learned and practiced the importance of active listening and reflection during moments of trauma and transition. She then moved to Chicago to serve a congregation three blocks from Wrigley Field. Her main responsibilities included overseeing a Friday evening program for at risk LGBTQ youth and the young adult ministries of the church. Larissa has since served congregations in New Jersey and Queens, NY. She has also served as the Director of Church Relations at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Throughout her life and career, Larissa has been dedicated to racial and gender justice. She is interested in the ways that the intersections of all parts of one's identity can be embraced as strengths. This work brought her to denominational leadership, including serving as the Vice-Moderator to the 221st General Assembly, where she was able to challenge the current structures and assumptions of life together. Larissa is a regular speaker and preacher throughout the denomination.