

ST. PETER'S NET

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All Saints Day to the First Sunday of Advent

November 2009

Saying Yes to the Invitation

There's a joke about a pastor who, after preaching a long sermon, gave an altar call "Come to the altar and give your life to Christ!" he said. Nobody came. In frustration, the pastor said, "Come to the altar as a way of saying that you love and honor God." Still nobody came. In even greater frustration, the pastor appealed to the congregation, "Come to the altar as a way of saying that you want to live a better life." Nobody came. Finally, "Look, if you love your mother, come down to the altar. Okay?"

Whether out of frustration or fear, we preachers at times can trivialize discipleship and try to dilute the Good, yet challenging News, which Jesus proclaims. Often we are tempted to make Jesus' words more palatable for our congregations and for ourselves. Episcopal priest, Sarah Dylan Breuer, writes this week in her lectionary blog, "Please, preachers ... work this Sunday to bring your congregation to the place Jesus' disciples were when they said, in effect, "What in God's name are you saying?" The job of a sermon, in my opinion, is not to resolve difficulties. The job of a sermon is to inspire deeper discipleship, and discipleship is not easy. Jesus offers us abundant and eternal life — real joy, real love, real peace. The opportunity we are being offered this Sunday and every day is to let the shock of Jesus' word jolt us out of those old, unfulfilling, enslaving ways of seeing, living and relating to others so that we're freed to experience more of what God wants for us. ... That's profound transformation, and we do a profound disservice to one another when we pretend otherwise."

If there is any Gospel story which jolts us out of the old, unfulfilling and enslaving ways of seeing and living, it is this one. A rich, young man approaches Jesus and asks him the million dollar question, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus realizes that the young man has come to him with great sincerity. He is a devout Jew, earnest in his attempt to keep all the commandments. But he has realized something is

missing in his life. He hungers for something more. He is seeking a deeper relationship with his God. Jesus knows this. He loves the young man for this. He invites him to be his disciple and thus to embrace a more meaningful way to live and know God. "Let go," Jesus lovingly tells him. "Let go of your money, your possessions. Let go of what is controlling your life, of what is holding you back from the fullness of life."

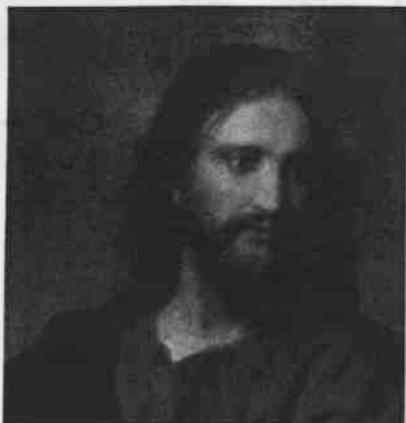
Sadly, the young man can't let go. His life is too complicated and complex. He is weighed down by too many things, too many worries, too many obligations and too much money. And so with a heavy heart, he turns and walks away. This young man, as far as I know, is the only individual in all of the Gospels who rejects Jesus' personal invitation to come and follow him. I've often wondered what happened to the rich, young man when he walked away from Jesus. Did he return to his old life and did he remain unfulfilled? Did he struggle for the remainder of his days with this hunger deep within him? Or did he rethink his decision and run back to Jesus, saying YES!

We will never know what happened to him, but we do know this: the struggle of the young man is our struggle. We can be tempted to say about ourselves, "Oh, but I'm not rich" and then proceed to wag our fingers at others whom we deem as the wealthy ones and say this passage is all about them. Friends, this story
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back from the fullness of life."

Saying Yes (continued)

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is our story. We hear Jesus' challenging invitation to let go of everything and follow him and we can't help but be jolted by its impact. Early on in my ministry, a seasoned, clergy friend said to me that one of the reasons he believed

we were spending so much time and energy discussing sexuality as a church was because it was a convenient distraction from the real spiritual crisis we were facing: our idolatry of money and possessions — that is the power money holds over us. "Emily," he told me, if you care about your people and you care about the Good News being proclaimed, you better not shy away from talking about money and you better pray about it, too!"

If we are honest with ourselves, we are more like the rich, young man than we care to admit. Being confronted by Jesus with the invitation to let go of our need to possess things, to let go of the control we crave is not what we signed up for when we said we'd be his disciples. Jesus' words are shocking and should jolt us out of our complacent and warm and fuzzy faith into a whole new way of seeing and living.

This past month we began our stewardship season. Our personal act of stewardship is an important part of our call to discipleship. The encounter between Jesus and the rich, young man encourages us to examine carefully where our priorities lie and what we value most in our lives. In giving of ourselves and our resources to our parish family we proclaim that this community, this life of faith for ourselves and our children and grandchildren is what we value most. In giving of ourselves and our resources we make a deeper commitment to God in Jesus. The time, talent and yes, friends, the money we give are our affirmative responses to Jesus' invitation to follow him and become one of his disciples.

As a community we have much to celebrate during this season. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God

has brought us together as priest and people and renewed our sense of mission and ministry. We are being called by God to embark on an exciting, new journey to seek a bold vision for our future together. Even as we begin this journey, we continue to engage in our on-going mission: *being rooted in love, growing through God's grace and reaching out to all*. We also find ourselves in a place where we need to become more responsible with the use of our resources. We continue to have to rely on our endowment funds to cover the cost of our operating expenses. The vestry and I are very clear that we do not want to fritter away that money over the next five to ten years. As a parish we need to live within our means and commit ourselves to working towards a balanced budget.

We have much work to do. It is both joyful and challenging work. I need your help. The vestry needs your help. In order to build on our on-going mission and create a bold vision for our future together, I need every single member of this parish to give not only of your time and talent, but of your treasure. In fact, my expectation is that every household will make a pledge for 2010 and engage in a new way in Jesus' call to discipleship.

Jesus' words to his disciples are some of my final thoughts to you. Remember that "for God all things are possible." I believe wholeheartedly that we can balance our budget, that we can build on our on-going mission and create a bold vision for our future. We can do it together. We can do it with God's help. May we be freed from the obligations, the worries, the possessions and especially the power that money holds over us so that we can embrace what God wants for us more than anything, the abundance of life in Christ. May each and every one of us have the courage not to turn and walk away from Jesus' invitation, but be able to say YES — to step out in faith and give of ourselves in joy and gratitude to God and to our community.

— Emily †

Details from "Christ and the Rich Young Ruler" by artist Heinrich Hofmann



