

Proper 23B

The Rev. Emily Richards

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*To Stop Clutching*

On Friday, we finally got a hint of fall with those clear blue skies and crisp cool air. The beautiful weather reminded me how much I love this time of year. No season offers such visual beauty as the vividness of autumn. The delight of autumn colors is in part so spectacular because it is tinged with the melancholic realization that this beauty is short-lived. The leaves will fall from the trees, the bounty of the earth will be harvested, the land will be left barren, and the blue skies will turn grey and cold. The earth will soon lie fallow, embracing a period of dormancy in order to prepare for its own renewal in spring. Parker Palmer writes, "autumn constantly reminds me that my daily dyings are precursors to new life. If I 'try' to make a life that defies the diminishments of autumn, the life I end up with will be artificial, at best, and utterly colorless as well. But when I yield to the endless interplay of living and dying, dying and living, the life I am given will be real and colorful, fruitful and whole...Nature teaches us a steady lesson: if we want to save our lives, we cannot cling to them but must spend them with abandon."

This lesson is the very same message we hear through Mark's story of the rich, young man. In Jesus' day, those with wealth not only had possessions but status, fame and power, not unlike in our own society. Judaism taught that wealth was an indication of God's favor, further adding to one's prestige. The young man approaches Jesus as someone who on the surface seems to have it all: But he falls prostrate at this teacher's feet, yearning for something more in life, seeking a life of meaning and purpose that up to this point has eluded him. And Jesus' response is to look at him with love. To really love this young man Jesus had to know him, to be able to see beyond the wealth and status to the depths of his soul, the depths of his struggle. Jesus invites the rich young man to let go of the sense of privilege which had defined and shaped him and to put his trust not in the things of the world, but in him who knows him and loves him deeply. Jesus invites him to embrace the truth that to save our lives, we cannot cling to them but must give them away with abandon. With great sadness, the man walks

away from Jesus' invitation. He can't let go. He can't yield to Jesus' call.

There's a story which illustrates well the young man's struggle. The story goes that African hunters wanting to capture monkeys unharmed would use as a trap a bottle with a long narrow neck, just large enough so a monkey could put its hand in it. In the evening the bottle would be tied to a tree, and in the bottom of the bottle they would place several good-smelling nuts. In the morning they would find a monkey with its hand clutching the nuts, held securely in the bottle. At any time, the monkey could have released itself simply by opening its hand.

The young man's inability to let go of his possessions kept him trapped, preventing him from experiencing the fullness of life that Jesus had promised him. What is it that we keep holding onto in that bottle? What prevents us from hearing Jesus' invitation and then embracing it? It may indeed be our wealth or our possessions. Or it may be our privilege, our desire for self-sufficiency or our denial of our own vulnerability. It may be our unhealthy relationships or our destructive habits. It may even be our dependency on performing some task or a certain role here at the church continuing to cling to something because that's always how we've done it. The good news for us is that Jesus looks at us in all our struggling and striving, in our trying and our failing. He looks at us and loves us, too. And he yearns for us to know our true worth which is not defined by our things or our status, or what we do. He invites us to trust in him, to trust that we are one of God's beloved and to live fully out of that love.

In the church year we find ourselves focused on the ministry of stewardship. In this season as we celebrate together all the gifts God has given us, I ask that you do something that you may have never done before. When you open the letter in the mail from me containing your pledge card and the new narrative budget created by our Accounting Warden, I don't want you to do what you may typically do. I don't want you to glance over the letter quickly and then without thinking fill in the same amount you've always pledged or decide to support the ministries you've always given your time to because that's what you do around here or what you know the church needs volunteers for; or if it is your custom, to disregard the letter and the pledge card altogether, finding it only months later under a pile of papers. Instead I am asking you to take that pledge card and imagine that you are kneeling before Jesus like

that rich, young man, engaging in the very same conversation. What is Jesus inviting you to let go of? What do you keep clutching tightly to? I am asking you to prayerfully consider these questions as well as Jesus' loving response.

For friends, neither you nor I can be faithful stewards of our time, talent and money; neither you nor I can give generously to the ministry of this community and to the mission of Jesus Christ in our world without first asking ourselves honestly what we are clinging to and then implore Jesus to help us to relinquish it. We cannot begin to say yes with joy without first saying no with confidence. Stewardship is our grateful response to the fullness of life God has promised us in Jesus. It is putting into practice that wonderful lesson that our natural world has taught us: when you and I yield to the endless interplay of living and dying, embracing and letting go, the life we are given will be real and colorful, fruitful and whole...For, if we want to save our lives, we can't cling to it. As we courageously struggle to put into practice what we've been taught, may we be reassured that Jesus is looking back at us and loving us, reminding us over and over again, that with God it is all possible. Amen.