

Nathan Brown
“We Are What We Give Away”
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West Side Christian Church

Mark 10:17-31

We live in a culture that teaches us: “You are what you own.” Perhaps there is no better symbol for this fact than the “self-storage” business. You cannot drive anywhere anymore without passing a huge sign for a nearby self-storage center. These centers are full of row upon row, stack upon stack of tiny storage units, filled with people’s belongings. Whenever I pass a self-storage center, I often ponder what people are storing: old furniture, books, family heirlooms, cars, or just old tattered belongings of which one cannot let go.

After reading our passage from Mark again this week, I cannot help but think about that cultural phrase, “Self-storage,” and I wonder: How many selves are locked up in the belongings that rest in those storage units? Are we all locked away in the things that we own, safe and secure in our possessions and our wealth?

Whether or not we rent a storage unit, we cannot get away from the fact that we tend to define ourselves by our belongings. In his article, *Material Things*, Andrew Warner writes, “The origins of our country are wrapped up in what we choose to buy. The colonists revolted against the Stamp Act of the British Empire by boycotting British goods. This first major, coordinated protest against imperial rule in America not only turned the colonists into Americans, but also defined Americans by what they did or did not consume. To be American was to wear homespun clothes. And material consumption and possession have continued to be the means by which we define ourselves.”¹

Many of you know Marcia Fuson who is the minister of First Christian Church in Hampton. Like Marion and me, Marcia and her husband, Sam, are both clergy. However, Sam is an intentional interim minister. Sam serves churches temporarily while they are searching for a new pastor. In order to stay close to Marcia, he takes interims that are within a certain mile radius of Hampton Roads. His most recent interim just concluded at a Disciples Congregation in New Bern, North Carolina.

A couple of weeks ago, Sam was driving from New Bern, moving all of his things back to Hampton. His car was full of clothes, books, and a television that sat in his front seat. As he drove, Sam fell asleep at the wheel and was in a terrible car accident. Fortunately, he was not severely hurt.

In order that the tow truck could move his totaled car to the local junk yard, Sam had to remove all of his belongings from the car and put them on the side of the road until

¹ Warner, Andrew. “Material Things.” *The Christian Century*. October 5, 2006. Pg. 19.

Marcia could get there to pick them up. Upon doing this, five different cars stopped on the side of the road to inquire about Sam's television and some of his other belongings. Not one car stopped to see if everyone was okay after the wreck. Every person that pulled over was interested in buying something of Sam's. Our culture teaches us: "We are what we own."

The problem is that Jesus teaches that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God. In other words, the more baggage we carry, the more stuff we have, the more we consume...the more difficult it is for us to receive eternal life in Christ. Jesus teaches: "We are what we give away."

Many a preacher, teacher, and theologian have tried to soften these tough words from Jesus. An ancient scribe added words to make 10:24 read "how hard it is for those who *trust* in riches to enter the kingdom of God" (see the King James Version), as if the problem highlighted by the rich man is not being rich, but putting faith in the wealth a person has or craves. This solution ignores the overall thrust of this passage, where Jesus speaks quite plainly about the real obstacle that wealth presents.

A ninth-century interpreter made up the idea of a low gate into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle," through which camels could pass only if stooped and unladen. Presumably, then, Jesus criticizes only the proud rich, or only the rich who are not extremely determined to enter the kingdom. Unfortunately, no such gate ever existed, and Jesus' words in this passage fail to recognize such distinctions about wealthy people's attitudes.

Countless preachers have told us Jesus omnisciently perceived that wealth was this particular man's special "weak spot," and so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man's distinctive shortcoming. This gives us permission to assume that Jesus would not ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we really do not want to give up like our aggressive driving, fried foods, or our obsession with television.

We have tried everything to make this passage not so much about wealth and not so much about us. However, I am more and more convinced that Jesus' explanation is rather clear: just as large animals simply do not fit through tiny openings, so the wealthy, so you and I, do not fit in the kingdom of God.²

It is no wonder the man in our reading goes away from Jesus grieving. It is no wonder that you and I might be tempted to walk away from this passage sad and frustrated. Our society relentlessly tells us to measure who we are by what we own: the more we have, the more we are.

Therefore, giving away what we own means not only that we have less, but also that we *become* less. So it's easy to see ourselves in this story. For Jesus is not just

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=4>

asking us to give away our things—Jesus is demanding we give away who we are—that we stop securing ourselves away in our savings accounts, locking ourselves up in our retirement funds, and protecting ourselves in our personal assets. Jesus is telling us to give away who we are.

It has been interesting to see how our discussions in Bible study the last couple of weeks have been directly tied into our lectionary readings for Sunday morning. This week's Bible Study lesson was on the parable of the talents. Most of you are familiar with this parable.

A business owner gives each of his servants a particular number of talents, according to each servant's ability, in order that the servants might invest those talents and grow them in the business owner's absence. To one servant was given four talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent.

The first two servants doubled the owner's talents by making wise investments with what had been entrusted them. The owner was pleased with these two servants. However, the servant that had been given one talent decided not to risk losing that talent by burying the talent until the owner returned.

Upon receiving his one talent back, the owner banishes the servant who buried his talent, to a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. The servant loses his life, in essence, because he held too tightly to what he had been given. He never risked what had been entrusted to him. Instead, he went the route of safety and security and was punished as a result.

The same point Jesus makes in that parable is the same point that Jesus makes to this rich man, to you and me, in this story from Mark. "Those who save their lives will lose them, but those who give their lives for Jesus' sake will save them." In order to faithfully follow Jesus Christ, we must let go of that which truly defines us, of that to which we are bound, of that which gives us comfort and security—for most of us, this is our money, our assets, and our wealth.

Tony Compolo tells a story about a friend of his who had to take a bus trip across central India. He was in an old model bus, which was packed with people, packages, furniture and even animals. Sitting across from Tony's friend was a tired man whose neatly wrapped package was sitting on the luggage rack over his head. The man kept dozing off and each time he would wake up in a panic fearing that his package had been stolen. This went on for hours. Eventually he fell asleep.

When he awoke his package was gone. Momentarily he panicked as he realized he had been robbed. But, being relieved that the thing that caused him constant worry was now gone, he settled back in his seat, totally relaxed and with a sense of joy he fell into a prolonged, wonderful sleep.

Our belongings, our possessions, and our wealth end up causing us more stress and discomfort than they do security and comfort. We spend our whole lives trying to build up protection against loss. Sometimes, however, loss is what gives us back our lives. Giving away what we are frees us up to live life more abundantly and more faithfully.

I like the way Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with. You cannot make room for it if your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go."

Given our current economic circumstances, the words Jesus speaks, in this reading from Mark, hit us even harder than they normally might. When times are tough, we tend to hold even closer to what gives us protection. Particularly when we have lost quite a bit, it is our natural human instinct to cling tighter to what we have left. This mentality creeps into the church in the way that we go about our ministry.

In fact, we start to make decisions based on the economy of our world and not the economy of God. We say things like, "We can't start that program right now, it's too expensive." "We can't increase our budget, we can't afford it." "We can't give to the church right now, times are just too tight!"

Over and over again, I hear about churches who live in a mentality of scarcity, who cling too tightly to their belongings and die a slow death as a result. However, I also hear, every now and then, about those churches who spend less time worrying about their belongings, and more time worrying about to whom they belong.

These churches don't rest on large savings accounts or endowments. They get by on what they receive each Sunday morning. When they don't have enough to pay the light bill or the minister's salary, God inspires someone to give what is needed—and they continue to move forward.

The story of Jesus Christ teaches us over and over again, that it is not about what we own, but about what we give away. It is not about our belongings, but about to whom we belong. It is not about who we are, but about whose we are.

Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than it is for a person of wealth to enter the kingdom of God." When we hear those words, we cannot help but feel like the disciples and respond with them, "Then who can be saved?" But remember Jesus' response—"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; For God all things are possible." The hardest news Jesus has is the best news we could get -- our salvation is impossible, except for God.