

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost      October (20) 23, 2016

Zion Ev Lutheran Church      Columbus, WI

**Luke 18:18-27**

Rev. Timothy M. Schwartz

Loved ones,

How much are you worth? If you talk to someone in finance about how much you are worth, he'll simply ask you how much you own and how much you owe. The difference would be how much you are worth. Of the 1,810 people on the planet who are valid billionaires, the top three are Bill Gates of the US with \$75 billion, Amanico Ortega of Spain worth \$67 billion, and Warren Buffet of the US and worth \$60 billion.

If you ask someone in a laboratory "How much are you worth?" she might answer a little differently. If you break down the human body into chemicals like hydrogen, oxygen, potassium, even trace amounts of gold, some say that your chemicals would be worth as much as \$160, other say as little as \$4.50.

But if you ask someone in medicine, the figure goes higher. Add up the value of all of a person's bone marrow and lungs and other tissues and fluids the price goes up from \$4.50 to \$45 million. Now that is kind of impressive, isn't it – to think that we have (\$2.25 billion) \$9 billion \$6.75 billion worth of people here (tonight) this morning this morning.

Now, I'm going to guess that you are thinking, "There is more to a person's worth than money." You are right. We use morality to measure a person's worth as much as money. When a person passes away, much of the time surrounding the funeral is spent discussing how much the person was worth to people – how many people the person helped, how the person made you laugh that one time, how much the person cared for you and changed your life when she died. One of the first things we look for when we find a friend on Facebook is how many other friends they have – and if it's a high number conclude "If they are liked by a lot of people, they must be a good person, they must be worth a lot to so many." Money isn't the only measure of a person's worth. How much they affect people's lives for the better, how much good they do is another way we use to measure the worth of a person's life.

In our gospel lesson today, we meet a man who was worth a lot by both measures. God calls him a wealthy man, and it calls him a leader – a man who was public figure. If he were not the good man he claimed to be, someone would have been able to say so. No one did. He was rich both in terms of money and morality.

But he was missing something and he knew it. That's where we find ourselves today, overhearing a conversation between a man and Jesus that reveals to us just how much each of us is worth.

We're not told his name, only that he was a "ruler." Everyone in the town knew his name. He was responsible for making laws and decisions that affected things like their taxes and their safety, their health and their families. If you respect a leader, you also listen carefully to not only what he says, but also what he does. No doubt there were people watching how this ruler spoke with Jesus and how he reacted to what Jesus had to say.

He was not a hypocrite. Other leaders of Jesus day, we are told, approached him and asked trick questions in the hopes of getting him to say something they could use against him. This man bowed down before Jesus, called him, "Good teacher," and asked him a very straightforward question: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

He did not get the answer he was expecting.

Jesus first of all told him that no person is truly good, not by God's definition. "No one is good—except God alone.

Jesus then pointed something else out – you can try, but let me remind you of the standard before you think that you will be able to do it. He listed off God's requirements for perfectly loving the people around you... no adultery, no murder, no stealing or lying, and always respect those in authority.

Here's where we get the answer from the ruler that we don't expect: "I have carefully followed those rules since I was a child," he said. Really? All of the commandments? Since he was a child? He didn't say, "I've tried." He didn't say "Most of the time." He said "Constantly, for years." How could he say that?

Have you ever noticed how terrible your neighbor's lawn looks ... right after you have mowed yours? And have you ever noticed how your neighbor's lawn at the same length in the same condition "Doesn't look so bad," if your lawn is overgrown. That's the trick with which our human nature works us over – we inflate the value of the good things we do in our mind to where we think we are great, and we undervalue the seriousness of our sin to think it's not so bad. If comparing our lives with the lives of other people is the only way we have to determine how much our lives are worth, we'll never know. We'll certainly never be certain that we are worthy of God's eternal kingdom. We need the Holy Spirit to tell us the truth – the true worth of our lives, and the true way to be worthy of God's kingdom. That's where Jesus was leading this man.

Jesus was really leading him to eternal life.

He didn't argue with the man. He said, "Okay. Well, if you are so good, then here's the secret. Sell everything you have and follow me." Jesus was not giving him another rule to follow that would make him just a little more worthy. Jesus was challenging him to stop measuring his worth by human standards and start measuring his worth by God's standards. By God's standards, one can only be truly good if you are sinless. One can only be sinless by being in the presence of Christ, something that happens only by faith. Your life goes from worthless to priceless when the sinless Son of God is in it. Without it, a life is worthless.

There was a church a few years ago that needed to be remodeled on the inside. There were structural problems, worn carpet, beat up pews and paint. In the process, someone noticed that the brick wall behind the altar had some problems toward the ceiling. The mortar between the bricks was crumbling and when you looked close it was clear that, from the color of the brick that it had been repaired once before. They hired a mason to take out the old brick and fix it right this time.

It was a good thing that he a man who worked slow. In the process of taking the old brick away, he discovered that the brick he was removing was not replacement brick... there was no brick in that spot in the wall. Underneath what he took away was a stain glass window that was part of the original construction that had simply been covered over with brick at some point in the churches history.

When the congregation heard what happened they told the man to get to work immediately – they removed the stain glass, cleaned it up and asked the mason to reframe the window. Now something that was worthless because it was covered and buried in crumbling

brick is a beautiful work of art, worth thousands to an appraiser and even more to the people who see the light it lets into the church and makes everything around it look more beautiful.

We are born covered in sin. Jesus does for us what he mason did for that stain glass – he removed our sin, washed our souls in the blood that he bled when he was crucified and made us new. Now, he puts where he does in our lives to make the world around us more beautiful.

Jesus was not telling all of us that we have to sell everything we own to be saved. His own disciples Peter and John to own their own houses. His follower Joseph to own a garden in which Jesus was buried. But Jesus knew that this man had a battle going on inside of him to judge his own worth by money and morality instead of by the goodness that God gives by grace. So he gave the man a test – you have a good life, but will it still be good if your friends leave you because you follow me? You have a good life, will it still be good if your finances are gone? You have a good life, will it still be worth living if your future is not the one you imagined because you follow me?

It's when we face the same tests that we find out how much our lives are really worth.

Are you faced with losing friends if you follow Jesus? Are you made to feel that if you don't keep up with them in all the things you own that your life is not worth as much as theirs or are you content that your life is valuable because God says you are worth dying for?

Are you faced with missing out on fun because, by faith you live in the presence of Christ and that makes your conscience more sensitive to sin? Do you resent not feeling more normal, more like the people in the world around you, or will you be content that following God's will is better than following the crowd?

Are you faced with tighter finances for following Jesus than you would be without him? Of course you are! Something that comes with following Jesus is the need to express your faith with your offerings? Will you give the bare minimum in your mind so that you can secretly save up for what you really want? Will you wait until someone tells you there is a need to reconsider your offering, or will you give as God wants you to give – constantly evaluating how he has blessed you, realizing that all you have is his anyway, and genuinely ask him how much he thinks you can offer?

Is it becoming clear to you that your future is much different than the one you had imagined for yourself not long ago. Someone's health takes a dive and your dreams of traveling or moving change. Sin breaks apart a family and you spend your time picking up pieces and putting out fires instead of living in peace as you imagined. Your life is still beautiful because God says it is. Because he made it that way through Jesus. Because he promises that he will strengthen you and bless you as you follow him.

There was an old Jewish saying that "Fitting an elephant through the eye of a needle is so impossible, it doesn't even happen in dreams." I wouldn't be surprised if Jesus was picking up on this when his disciples claimed that it was impossible to be saved and follow him. That was his point – on our own, it's impossible to do what only God can do. It's impossible to make our lives worth anything by money or morality, but with God all things are possible. With God your life is precious. You are beautiful. You are loved. You are saved. It's not only possible. It is God's promise.

Amen.