

Preaching to Affluent Young Adults, or Lord, Help Me Shove This Camel

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At Duke, the majority of our students come from homes with incomes over seventy-five thousand dollars a year. Because our university is extremely selective in our admissions, we have some of the most academically gifted in the nation, giving us our well-deserved status as the fifth or sixth best college in the country. Our students are destined to get the best jobs after graduation.

Which means that we get only a fraction of them in Duke Chapel on a Sunday morning, no more, I would estimate, that six or seven percent of the student body. Only about four hundred of them have the guts to risk being that close to Jesus.

Therefore I give thanks that the Common Lectionary eliminates Matthew 19:16-30 from its table of Sunday lessons. Luke calls this earnest seeker after wisdom “a ruler” (Luke 18:18). Mark (10:20) and Luke (18:21) both remember him as having kept all the commandments “from my youth,” thus making him old enough to look back on his younger days.

Only Matthew describes him as a *neaniskos*, a young adult from twenty-one to twenty-eight years old. He is too young to be Mark and Luke’s “ruler,” but he, being young, capable (morally and spiritually speaking), and curious, is destined to rule. Though like all rich young people (with the exception of Britney Spears or Leonardo DiCaprio) his wealth has come from his parents, he appears to be quite a high achiever. He comes to Jesus, not inquiring into Jesus’ theology or program but rather wondering what good [deed] he must do to obtain “eternal life.” He is big on doing. Mark and Luke have him call Jesus “good.” Matthew has him inquire what good *he* must do to be good.

Jesus appears to have a short fuse for these upwardly mobile, healthy minded, high achieving, young upstart *neaniskoi*. The main “good” that Jesus represents is not the good that we good people can do but rather the good that God is doing. He brushes the young man off with a conventional comment about the importance of keeping all the Commandments.

“All these I have kept,” replies the young man. Wow, this kid really is a high achiever, spiritually speaking. Only Mark says that Jesus looked at this young man and “loved him” (Mark 10:21), loving him so much as to push on to even weightier demands. Matthew has the young man push Jesus with, “What do I still lack?” (19:20). He really is a persistently high achiever, this rich young man.

Jesus tells him that if he would be *teleios*, unfortunately rendered as “perfect,” he must, “go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor...come, follow me” (19:21). Discipleship demands a rigorous, undivided devotion.

With that, the young man became depressed, grieving, and walked away, “for he had many possessions” (19:22).

As many have noted, this is a call story. Someone has been called to become a disciple and to follow Jesus at all cost. Of all the call stories in the Gospel of Matthew, this is the only one that ends in failure, depression, grief, and the one being called

walking away from Jesus. And let the North American church take note: the reason was money. Money, more than youth, keeps folk from following Jesus. As Jesus told his disciples, “It is just about impossible for rich folk – Enron execs, WorldCom bamboozlers, Martha Stewart, or tenured professors at selective universities – to get in the Kingdom of God. Still, with God, well, just about anything is possible.”

Preachers like me work within that thin realm of possibility, stake everything we have on the possibility that, while the salvation of upwardly mobile, secure, self-satisfied folk like us is hard, really hard, “for God all things are possible” (19:26). Even to preach to upwardly mobile young adults is thus a sign of extravagant faith in the power of God ultimately to get what God wants.

This story, laid alongside my ministry with young adults, yields the following insights for those of us who are called, cursed or blessed, with preaching Jesus to affluent young adults:

The challenge of Christian preaching is the challenge of preaching Jesus. Many of my homiletical failures are due not only to my limited oratorical abilities but also due to Jesus. We preachers work with some demanding material. Jesus is not infinitely pliable, congenial to our programs of human betterment, or interested in the dilemmas of the affluent. He is amazingly more willing to have someone get depressed, cast into grief, and walk away grieving with possessions still intact than to crank down his gospel to their limitations. One day, depressed with the meager results of my homiletical efforts, I poured out my feelings of defeat to my friend, Stanley Hauerwas. Stanley said, “Cheer up. This is a bad neighborhood for Jesus. I think you do quite well, considering that the university is against everything you believe.” Thanks for the encouragement.

Discipleship is demanding, exclusive, and costly because it is about following Jesus. Though I have some hunches, I do not know why Jesus is so rough on the rich. There really does seem to be, in Jesus, a kind of Jewish, prophetic prejudice against the affluent. Perhaps it is a liturgical problem. Luther said that whatever you would sacrifice your daughter for, that is your “god.” We live in a society that thinks nothing of sacrificing our youth to the gods of thinness, the corporation, Eros, chemical crutches, and on and on. Thus every day we must wake up, jump out of bed, and learn to monotheize. Every day we must repeat the prayer taught to us: *Hear O Israel, the Lord Your God is One.* We’ve got a jealous God here who tolerates no rivals. Our society has shown the ability to mass-produce golden calves and to worship them with abandon. Our ethics is a function of our worship. Mammon is just too good a God, to too many in our culture, to expect him to die without a fight. Therefore, preaching not only to the young, but also to the affluently young, is about as easy as shoving a fully loaded dromedary through the eye of a needle.

The higher the level of affluence within a given congregation, especially a congregation of affluent young adults, the greater the possibility of homiletical failure. There appears to be something built in to the Good News that is prejudiced against folk who have more than they need for their own good, who fail to see what they have as theirs for someone else’s good. This story of the rich young man ends in one of Jesus’ more public failures. Our homiletical work among the affluent is prone to failure too, if we preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. After all, I’m no better preacher than Jesus. If he could not find some way to make the gospel user-friendly to the rich young man, how can I? In fact, I ought to guard against attempts to make Jesus less

antagonistic toward the rich than he is. A preacher is known as much by her sermon failures as her sermon successes.

Fortunately, we preach in an age that provides us with lots of sermon illustrations on the deadly results of service to the kingdoms of this world rather than the Kingdom of Heaven. The first Sunday of this school year, a student said to me, “I guess you clergy are thrilled to have the business scandals to work with this year.” I replied, “Right! I need to get down on my knees this evening and say, ‘Thank you God for Ken Lay of Enron. At last I’ve got a good sermon illustration!’” We’ve come to expect business to have little regard for the good of the customers, but when they screw even the stockholders, we’ve got something to preach. I predict (you heard it here first) that the scandals of American business management, the great human misery created by the sort of folk who hang out with George W. at the club, will have a greater influence upon the psyche of this generation of young adults than even the horrors of 9/11. We’ve seen the results of our two-decade run on the treasures of this world and they are ugly. I ask you this: Was Jesus asking the rich young man to do something terrible and difficult or something liberating and wonderful? I know young adults who can tell you that it is great, good freedom to strip down, break free, and throw their future away on the Kingdom of God rather than harness up for a lifetime of servitude to the kingdoms of this world. Our task is to preach what seems like bad news as, in truth, good news.

The story of the rich young man does not really end with Jesus’ unsavory comparison of the young man to a fully loaded filthy camel (19:24). The story ends with Peter’s excited exclamation, “We have left everything and followed you!” Jesus affirms his followers, assuring them that they have given up nothing that will not be restored, and better “at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory” (19:28). In the end, his narrow way shall be glorified, and so shall we. The story ends, not in grief, but in celebration at the incredible glory of being privileged to be part of Jesus’ eternal life. The story is part of the good news, and the fact that I sometimes read this as bad news is in part an indication of how trapped I am by my social location rather than by the gospel.

Sometimes Duke alumni ask me, “How many students do you get out at Duke Chapel on a Sunday morning?” I am tempted to answer, “More than Jesus ever attracted,” but I don’t. On Sunday morning, in the middle of such affluence, and such upward mobility, and so bright a future, we are still, as we have always been, a distinctly minority movement.

So I respond to “How many students do you get out on a Sunday morning?” with “Enough. We only get about four or five percent of the student body, but fortunately, that’s all we need keep the whole campus nervous.”