

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost

October 11, 2009

“Can I Inherit Eternal Life?”

Text: Mark 10:17-31

My dad used to give our last name and if someone did not quite get it, he would say “Griffith, as in Andy, not Merv.” Of course both Andy Griffith and Merv Griffin were well known, so most people caught on pretty quickly. This way of identifying who we, the Griffith family, were also led us to once in a while make mention of “Uncle Andy.” So I was thinking this week, what could I do to inherit some of “Uncle Andy’s” wealth? First, I would probably have to establish that I was related to Andy Griffith. This is most likely impossible because I really doubt that I am related. However, there is a small possibility that some time in history back in Wales that our family history crossed. But even if Andy Griffith is a very distant cousin or actually an uncle, there is no reason for him to give part of his inheritance. I am certain that there are many family members closer to him and I know that no one has to give away money for his or her estate to anyone else. As long as Andy Griffith has a will, his money will go wherever he designates. Since he does not know me at all, even proof of a distant relationship would not give him any reason to give me part of the family inheritance. So I think it is safe to say that my becoming heir to Andy Griffith’s money is as likely as the rich man in our gospel giving up all his possessions to inherit eternal life.

This gospel often leaves us exactly where Peter is. What about me? Of course in Peter’s situation and for all of the first twelve, they really did leave behind their homes and families to follow Jesus. We cannot honestly even say we have sacrificed anything except for maybe a few sporting events, golf outings, trips, or days to sleep in for church. None of us gave up our families, our homes, our jobs for Christ. I know that on the other hand, we do not consider ourselves rich, but by the world’s standards almost everyone in the US is rich. Most in this room have a lot of stuff – I know that I do! I am not prepared to give away all my stuff. Neither was the rich man. He was ready to follow the commandments, he was ready to live a good life, he probably would have been happy to share his ten percent. In fact, there is a good likelihood that he too is on his way to the temple where he would make his sacrifice. But he is not prepared to give everything away. When we think about giving things or money away, we get anxious. We do not want to part with so many items. Some are valuable because we worked hard and saved to buy that particular item. I know that cars are that way for our family. Other items are sentimental and we cannot imagine parting with them. Some are necessities, even nuns and monks have personal clothing. We cannot give away everything to inherit eternal life.

So we all start to think about what else we can do to inherit eternal life. Sometimes a check list would be nice. Say our prayers every day, read the Bible, come to church, participate in the life of the church, believe in Jesus, be nice to others and do good deeds... many a few others. If we could at least get 90% of these things right, we sometimes hope God will let us in. We talk about salvation this way. We refer to people being good people who donated lots of time and devotion to others. We tell about

how nice or how helpful people are and we try to convince ourselves that good people do inherit eternal life. But this passage makes us stop.

First the rich man asks what he can do to inherit eternal life. Jesus and he talk following the commandments. Finally Jesus challenges this righteous man to go and sell all that he owns and give the money to the poor. Are his possessions keeping him away from God? Maybe. I know that at times my stuff and my schedule both keep me from God. Or is Jesus challenging the cultural notion that rich men are blessed by God and closer to God? Probably. Or is Jesus simply giving the man an impossible task to make him realize that he cannot do anything to inherit eternal life? I believe he is.

After the man goes away, the disciples here that it is impossible for humans to inherit eternal life. But even though it is impossible for a camel to through the eye of a needle and it is impossible for me to inherit Andy Griffith's wealth, all things are possible for God. As Hebrews reminds us, Jesus does the impossible. He becomes the one time sacrifice for us. Jesus is the final sacrifice and the great high priest who reconciles us to God.

So even though there is nothing we can do to inherit eternal life, we have it. We are part of God's kingdom. In our baptisms, we were made the children of God, inheritors of eternal life. We can do nothing to inherit eternal life, but we can do incredible things because we are already the heirs of salvation.

We are blessed and can share our wealth, maybe not every possession, but some of our wealth with the poor. We can give ten percent of everything God gives to us back to God's work through the church. We can remember that all we have is God's and not ours to do whatever we selfishly wish with it. We are free to life showing justice and mercy to those around us, especially the poor and most vulnerable. But none of these good actions can earn us a place in God's kingdom. We have a place because Christ died for us.

So can we inherit eternal life? Well, there is nothing we can do to inherit eternal life, but we already have inherited it. We are already part of the kingdom of God. So live as one who belongs to God's kingdom.