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## Pull up the Anchor, Hoist the Sail

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church  
October 10, 2021; Mark 10:17-31*

The gospel story for today is well known in church. It's the story of the man who comes with great deference to ask Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answers him by reminding him of what we now call the Ten Commandments: Don't steal. Don't commit adultery. Don't covet. If you are willing to zoom way in to this story and enter it imaginatively with your mind's eye, you can see this man. He is a good man. He says, "I have kept all these commandments since I was young." Now we know no one is perfect. Maybe this man was arrogant or a perfectionist. But I don't see him that way. I see an earnest person who genuinely has tried his entire life to live according to the highest ethical principles. I think he can say from the heart that he has committed no significant infractions. But he still feels there is something missing. So he comes to ask Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

I wonder if any of you can relate to him. Maybe there are even some of you who can authentically look back over your lives and say you have committed no significant ethical infractions. The rest of us can look back and see things we regret. Either way, I wonder if you can relate to this young man's question. Have you ever come to the point where you sense that no matter how much ethical learning you have, no matter how hard you try to live a good life, there is something more you want that is elusive?

This man calls that elusive something eternal life. In my childhood I was taught that eternal life meant going to heaven when you die. Eternity was kind of like a single line that went forever in one direction, toward the future, and most significantly meant that death is not the end. Now that is important. But surely eternity is not limited to a single line moving in one direction? Surely, by definition, eternity means moving in all directions simultaneously without end—ahead and behind, above and below, the future and the present and even the past—and that there is some kind of life, some kind of eternal life that is like that, utterly unbounded, expansive, and free. This is what the man wants. And isn't that what we all want?

And Jesus looks at this man and loves him. He doesn't respond with an inner eye-rolling thinking that he is stuffy or self-righteous or a goody two shoes. He loves him. And he responds with a paradox. "You lack one thing. Go and sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow me."

There is something about the life Jesus is teaching and modeling that involves more than ethics. It involves the paradox of generosity and a close relationship with Christ, that is the key to what the young man calls "eternal life," that Jesus calls "the kingdom of God." Jesus can truthfully say that for the rich, it is so hard to enter the kingdom of God. Now I suspect most of us would not define ourselves as rich. Oprah is rich. Lady Gaga is rich. By comparison to most of the world, though, we intellectually know we are extremely rich. And that's where things get a little uncomfortable. It's really awkward to talk about this during the annual pledge drive. Does Jesus really mean we should give up everything

we have? There are plenty of Christians throughout time who have said, absolutely he means it. Monastic and other intentional communities in the past and the present have done it. There is wisdom there. But that's not all of what Jesus says, there are two parts. He says, sell everything you have to give to the poor. Then, come and follow me. He talks about those who have left everything *for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the gospel*. And that is the key. What is worth more to you than safety, or security, or comfort? Really? What would you give up everything for?

Whatever that is, it is related to the eternal life—the life that Jesus says becomes possible when we release our hold on whatever we are grasping and possessing and instead embark on a journey to follow him. In Judeo-Christian tradition, this eternal life is integrally related to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was the original agent of creation, the Spirit who hovered over the face of the deep in the very dawn of time as our scriptures imagine it, and the same Spirit who gives Jesus the power to proclaim good news to the poor and release for the oppressed. The Spirit is the power of creation, life, and liberation. The Spirit is the power of resurrection too, the force who brings life out of death. In fact, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry describes the Way of Jesus as being “loving, liberating, and life-giving”—those three words that are the expression of the Spirit and of true Christian faith.

Who wouldn't want a life that is loving, liberating, and life-giving? To be fully and radically alive? But there is no getting around Jesus' essential teaching, the paradox of releasing and letting go in order to gain. What exactly does that mean for us as individuals and as a faith community?

Recently I was at the annual retreat of our church's Justice & Service team, and we were recognizing that we were at a crossroads. We recognized that we wanted to discern how the Spirit is leading us. We suspected we hadn't yet fully learned what the Spirit is asking of us in this time and this place in the history of our church and our city and world. I shared that following God's Spirit is more like sailing than coming up with a five year strategic plan. It's about figuring out which way the wind is blowing and setting our sails to catch it. There is real truth to this, because in both Greek and Hebrew, the two original languages of the Bible, the word for spirit is the same word that is used for wind, and also breath. The *ruach*, the Spirit. Of course, to catch the wind, you also have to pull up the anchor. And perhaps some of you know that our own Mark and Jenny Lindberg have recently bought a sailboat and have been learning how to sail on that great ocean that is Lake Superior. Mark was at the retreat and he said that the most thrilling part of sailing is the moment when you pull up the anchor. I imagine that there is a moment when you might seem to be dead in the water. But then the wind catches in your sail and you feel the boat start to move, effortlessly. And Mark said it is the moment when you realize you are part of something larger than yourself.

And isn't that the very essence of what Jesus is teaching here? It's true that we need to pull up the anchor of that which keeps us curved in on ourselves, whether that means selling all our possessions to provide for the poor, or letting go of old resentments, or becoming willing to grow and move and transform. But we also need to catch the wind, to become part of something bigger than ourselves. To be following a Power Greater

than ourselves, as twelve step programs would express it. We are invited to follow Jesus, who is always about love and liberation.

So how do we tell which way the wind is blowing? I recently asked at a staff meeting, how do you know when the Spirit is active at St. John's? They said some interesting things. One said, when a surprising number of people show up for something, and you feel the energy there and know it's significant. Someone else said, there is a certain messiness that is evidence of the Spirit at work. They didn't mean sloppiness or a lack of excellence. It's about being at a place where we can tell the truth about life as it actually is. Where people can come and risk not being at their Sunday best, not to act our hurts out on each other but because we come and together we let God heal our hurts. As Alike Galloway of Liberty Community church says, we are healers in need of healing. We can do this because we have Christ, our Great High Priest who has suffered in every way as we have, and who can sympathize with our weakness, as the reading from Hebrews says. So evidence of the Spirit's work among us means that we are able to get real with each other for the purpose of love and liberation and healing. That's like pulling up the anchor of all that has kept us captured.

And evidence of the Spirit's movement is also the radical movement of having caught the wind. Sailing is inherently dangerous. But it's thrilling. So we can feel pockets of energy where the Spirit is leading us, convicting us. For example, the Spirit seems to be leading us in the direction of really, truly connecting the efforts we make toward justice in the world with the core of the Way of Jesus. One without the other is just secular politicism on the one hand, or personal piety on the other. We can learn

to cultivate a culture of prayer, quiet, listening for the Spirit, so that we know where She is leading us.

And what an extraordinary gift that is. What if you can come to church not as a duty or a mild effort to learn about ethics but as a radically empowering gathering of people who are summoned and called by God for a purpose? There is a Church in Northeast Minneapolis called Mill City Church. They were founded on the assumption that they could detect the movement of God's Spirit and follow it. So for the first six months of their life as a church they didn't even meet in a building. They located themselves in a particular neighborhood and just tried to show up to what was happening there. If there was a call for volunteers, they showed up. If there was a block party, they showed up. When people asked them who they were they said they were part of a church. When people asked them, where is your church? They just said, "here." Eventually their mission statement "Loving our neighbors in the name of Jesus." They got a reputation for being really aware of and responsive to the neighborhood. One day someone approached them with a need—there were kids at school who needed weekend lunches. So they threw themselves into the effort of providing lunch for them. This came about because they were very intentional, not about asking church questions, but about asking God questions. Questions like, where is the Spirit active in our community and neighborhood and city? How can we cooperate with that?

If we do that, we will pull up the anchor and hoist the sail. We will get rid of the attachments we have about how to be church that truly don't nourish us or anyone, and instead follow Jesus intimately to the places

the Spirit is bringing life. We will be honest about our own need for healing from white supremacy culture, from the culture that assumes white is the norm, and how that has harmed not only black and brown bodies but those of us who are white as well. We will experience movement that creates its own momentum, that leads us step by step on the journey of faith, the Way of Jesus.

We can open ourselves to a Power Greater than ourselves whose will we know is always for thriving, to co-create a world with God in which all creatures, all life can thrive. Being part of something greater than ourselves means in our bones to recognize how very interdependent we all are on each other, that the American dream of individualism is not all there is and in fact has some toxic byproducts that are strangling those who do not have voice, who cannot defend themselves. In the kingdom of God that Jesus describes, there is enough because people are really willing to restructure their lives to share. In the kingdom of God, we move past ethics and seek to be intimate disciples of Christ, watching his every move, learning from the way he speaks with people and whom he values and how he heals. We can find Christ in relationship with those he calls “the least of these.”

Let’s ask the God questions. Let’s learn the practice of silence and listening so we can detect the wind, the movement of the Spirit. Let’s pull up the anchor of the many attachments and old hurts that no longer serve, let go of control, and hoist the sail. It will be risky, and full of the eternal life God intends for all creatures. Amen.