

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

Tell me if you've ever had this experience. You're reading the Bible, or hearing it read, and it's a well-known passage. You're familiar with it; maybe a hundred times before. But you realize something in the passage that you've never noticed before. Has this ever happened to you?

I'm always amazed when it happens to me. It's like a light bulb turning on in a dark room that I didn't even know was dark! "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword," says our reading today from Hebrews. Living and active. Not dead and dull. Sharper than a two-edged sword. Certainly sharper than our own perceptions. The Word of God has the ability to speak to us in new ways no matter how well we know it.

So...I had this experience last week, with our gospel reading about the rich young man. You know the story. He wanted to follow Jesus but Jesus said he needed to get rid of all his worldly goods. And the man couldn't do that: he was too wealthy. Here's the part I had never seen before. *He was asked to do nothing other than what the twelve original followers had already done.*

And it's even there in black and white. Peter says to Jesus: "We have left everything and followed you." I had never noticed that before. Of course! The fishermen left their nets. The tax collector left his business. The rich young man was asked to leave his wealth.

Maybe I never noticed it before because the disciples didn't seem to be giving up that much. Of course, on closer scrutiny, they did. They left their homes and villages; their families and livelihoods. But giving up the hard labor of fishing or the nasty job of collecting taxes from one's neighbors never seemed like much of a sacrifice in my view. Certainly not as much as giving up great wealth.

Rest assured: Jesus does not ask any of us to get rid of all we own in order to follow him. But he does ask us the same thing he asked of the rich young man: that we give up whatever lives at the center of our hearts and replace that with God. God comes first. Love comes first. The rich young man wasn't willing to reorder the priorities of his life.

Back in August, we devoted every Sunday's sermon to the topic of spiritual practices. Spiritual practices are really all we have to deepen our connection with God. We heard about Creation: how attentively being outside can foster a sense of wonder and draw us closer to God. We heard about Sabbath: how intentionally resting one day out of seven renews us and our longing for God. We learned about ancient practices that still work, like contemplating God's word – it is, after all, "living and active; sharper than any two-edged sword." Lectio divina: a monastic form of contemplating God's word that any of us can do. Centering prayer: a way of meditation. We learned about prayer – whether in communal forms or individual forms; whether in words, or song, or silence; whether we pray in stillness or in the movement of our bodies – we learned that prayer is cultivating the presence of God.

That was August. Now it is October. Episcopal congregations around the US begin to focus on their funding for the coming year. They conduct pledge campaigns. They ask loyal, faithful church-goers to contribute financially to the work of their parishes and thereby, to the work of God.

What many of us in leadership miss, regrettably, is talking about how pledging money is a spiritual practice. How you understand your wealth and how you relate to it is one of the surest signs of a God-centered life.

It's probably best illustrated by what happened with the McDonald's French fries. We all know how much kids love French fries. I do not doubt that – given the choice – most American children would have French fries for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

One day, a mom yielded to her daughter's pleas for French fries and the two of them went to McDonald's. As the little girl was enjoying her hot, crispy, salty fries, Mom reached over to take one from the bag. "Don't touch my fries," the little girl said. "I only want one," the Mom said. "Well, get your own." "But I got these for you. Can't you give me just one French fry?"

It's so easy to see, isn't it, when it's about one little girl who only wants to enjoy every single French fry she's been given. It's easy to see how selfish she is; how unfair; and most glaring of all: how ungrateful.

It becomes obvious very quickly that the issue isn't about the French fry. It's about the little girl getting what she wants. What she wants lives in the center of her heart: her needs; her desires (?).

How we understand our wealth is an indication of a God-centered life. How we relate to money in a regular, on-going way is a spiritual practice. We can think of our money as a tool given to us by God. Yes, it's a tool for doing God's work: heal the sick; feed the hungry; bring about a safer, more just world order for all of us.

But that's a secondary gain. That is not the primary way your money is a tool in your life. How you relate to your money – how you decide to use it – is the primary way to put God first in your life.

Take another look at the rich young man. This was a good guy. "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth," he told Jesus, referring to the commandments and to the practice of his Jewish faith. *But he was the one who wanted more.* "How can I have eternal life?" Or said more explicitly: "How can I dwell in God; be Spirit-filled; become conformed to the image and likeness of God?"

And Jesus said get rid of everything that stands between you and God. Let it go. In the case of this young man, it was money. Give it up.

Once again, Jesus does not ask us to give up all our money. But there are some requirements for living a holy, wholesome, and healthy life. Give one day out of seven to rest. That's 14 percent of your week. Give a tithe to your place of worship. That's less than the Sabbath requirement. A tithe is only ten percent. It's only a few French fries that you give to God. You keep the rest.

What this ten percent does is stretch you into greater reliance on God. It habituates you into gratitude. It helps clear away the clutter that stands between you and a God-centered life.

I have long forgotten when I began to tithe. Somehow, it isn't a big deal to me. Maybe because I've done it for so long. In fact, the only issue for me was a practical one. Do I tithe on my net income or my gross? The net is what I take home after taxes. The gross is what I actually earn. After a few moments deliberation decades ago, I decided to tithe on my gross.

Now the only question I have to answer every year at pledging time is how much money I expect to earn in the coming year. And then the math is easy. Even I, a non-mathematician, can do it. I take my expected earnings and figure 10 percent. That becomes my annual pledge to my church.

I figure it's the least I can do for all that God has given me in what has now been a long, lovely life. I am so grateful. Actually, my ten percent is not enough. I have to figure out a way to give more. That is my current struggle with how I relate to my wealth.

Undoubtedly, you have a struggle with how you relate to your wealth. It does take some honest calculations and prayer. But know that in this struggle – between you and your wealth – you are engaging in a spiritual practice and moving into a closer relationship with God.

That relationship is ultimately worth more than all your wealth. I hope that you will invest your wealth wisely as it relates to your overall life and growth in God.

Amen.