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### **Sell All and Follow: Discipleship and the Kingdom**

What do you suppose would happen if the church passed out cards that said, "If you're ready to follow Christ, sign up here— P.S. You have to sell all that you own and give the money to the poor." I can't imagine that there would be many people taking that offer, but it is precisely the one that Christ offers in today's Gospel reading from Mark.

This passage challenges us in ways we really don't like. It hits us in one of our most sensitive spots: our pocketbook, and it threatens our dependence on the comfort and sense of well being that money provides. It makes us ask ourselves, "What would we do if Christ said this to us?" Would we, too, go away grieving?

The decision to follow Christ is not an easy one. Jesus says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God," and while we might not always feel like it, in comparison with the rest of the world, most of us are pretty wealthy. We cannot dodge this message by claiming poverty.

So, as this reading seems to suggest, do we have to give away all that we own in order to follow Christ? Must *we* commit to a life of austerity and sacrifice? Does God want us to live without nice cars and big homes, or vacations to wonderful places? Do we have to give up plasma TVs, country clubs, and our season tickets to Sooner and Cowboy football games? Well, surely not the football tickets— even to God those must be sacred!

But Jesus tells this person, who has many possessions, that he must sell everything. Why would such an extreme action be necessary? The man is, by the standards of his society, a righteous person. Mark tells us that he has kept the commandments since youth and that Jesus loves him. But apparently that isn't enough to follow Christ. He still lacks "one thing."

What could be missing? Jesus tells the man what he must do, but we don't know why. Jesus doesn't specifically identify the deficit—or perhaps Mark didn't record it— but whatever it is, it is serious enough to keep the man—in a very literal sense— from a relationship with Christ. The implication is that his wealth has caused him to miss or lose something of even greater value than his money or possessions.

Perhaps the man lacks faith, or a generous heart, or maybe he's just so attached to the material world that he has lost the ability to see what is truly important. We can't say with any certainty, but maybe that's the point. Most, if not all of us, have something in our own life that has the power to separate us from God— to prevent *us* from following Christ. The excessive desire for wealth, status, and influence are common barriers to a rich spiritual life. For so many of us, material goods, accomplishments, and position are powerful indicators of a success. We assess our worth and that of others by what we own, where we live or go to school, what kind of job we have, the vacations we take, and whom we know. We work hard to surround ourselves with the physical reminders that we are important and valued.

But in the kingdom of God, richness is defined by an abundance of love, not money. Power comes through submission to God, not by controlling people or property. Glory belongs only to God.

It is this reversal of values that confuses the disciples— and many of us. Jews of the time regarded wealth as a sign of favor from God. By conventional standards, rich people would have been the most likely to inherit eternal life.

When Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God,” he is not speaking literally. He is making a statement about values in the kingdom, where the material wealth we accumulate in this life becomes worthless. If we want to follow Christ, then we must adopt the values that Christ teaches and make our choices accordingly.

Imagine how differently we might choose to do things if we wanted to glorify God instead of ourselves. Or if we measured wealth by how much we love, not by how much we own.

If we lived according to the values of the kingdom of God, would we treat homeless people with indifference, or those we love who have alcohol, drug, and other addictions as embarrassments? How might we respond to chronic poverty, HIV/AIDS, and immigration if we truly followed Christ? To my knowledge, Jesus never turned his back on anyone in need— that’s living in the kingdom.

The church, as imperfect as it is, is one of the principal ways we strive to advance the kingdom of God on earth. It is here—through worship, prayer, and our gifts of substance and service—that we grow in our relationship with God and each other. The mission and ministries of the church are among the ways we follow in Christ’s footsteps, continuing his work with the disadvantaged, the poor, and all those marginalized by a society that values money more than love.

When letters are sent asking for pledges to support the mission and ministry of St. John’s, I’m confident they won’t ask parishioners to sell all that they own. But pledges of financial support are part of our commitment to Christ and to the values of the kingdom.

When we give generously, without conditions or expectations, we are responding to God’s love with our own, because generosity— real generosity—is an act of love. And love *is* the overriding value in the kingdom.

The church does not ask us to give away all that we own. It asks us to follow Christ, to live as Christ teaches, to embrace the hope, compassion, love, and forgiveness that Christ embodies— and to live in ways that express those values. In a very personal, tangible and often challenging way, those pledge cards say to us, “If you’re ready to follow Christ, sign up here.”