

CLAIMING OUR INHERITANCE

As the salesman came to the front door, he turned to the little boy sitting on the steps and asked, "Is your mother home?" The boy said yes, and the salesman began to ring the doorbell. After several rings and no response, he turned to the boy and said, "I thought you said that your mother was home." To which the boy replied, "She is, but this isn't my house." Sometimes we get the wrong answers because we don't ask the right questions. In Mark 10, we read: "and as he was setting. Out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

That surely is the wrong question isn't it? Note carefully that word "Do". It represents one of the greatest misunderstandings about the Christian Faith. Methodists are most susceptible to this misunderstanding. We are often referred to as the "Doers" of Protestantism. Just find a good cause to be supported, and Methodists are usually there. In fact, we are so busy doing good works that someone once commented that he thought the Methodist' patron saint was "St. Vitus." Now, I am not knocking that, and I hope that you know me well enough by now to know that I believe that our Christian Faith must be put into practice. It must be practiced not only where we pray but where we play, not only where we worship, but where we work. But first we must have it, in order to practice it. Before it is a demand, it is a gift.

Most folks think that Christianity is a burden, something which must be done on top of all of the other things which one has to do. This man in today's Gospel lesson understood religion as something to be done. Then one could claim to have done what was required, and could therefore rest content with one's spiritual development. But a whole Reformation was fought over this one fact: the Gospel is not first of all a demand, but is rather a gift. In the 16th century, an elaborate theology had developed which made our relationship to God one of doing good deeds. If we did enough good deeds, then God would accept us; if we did not, then we were consigned to eternal punishment. Against all of this reward-and-punishment theology Martin Luther said "NO!"

Luther said that "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works." He took his text from Jesus in Luke 6:43-44: "For no good trees bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its fruit." Luther commented: "It is clear that the fruits do not bear the tree, nor does the tree grow on the fruits, but, on the contrary, the trees bear fruits and the fruits grow on the trees, the trees must exist before their fruits. He mockingly described the trees in the pope's garden which, he said, are very strange: they first have the leaves, and then the tree springs forth from the leaves. But this is to get everything upside-down. The tree comes first: then the fruits. The faith comes first, then the good deeds. One does not do good deeds in order to be

saved; but one does good deeds because one is saved. Receiving God's grace comes first; and then, afterward, the individual tries to do all that he or she can to reflect that grace. Can you imagine anyone who professed to be in love say, "I don't really care what my loved one wants. I don't care if I ever do anything to please them. But don't get me wrong, I really am in Love." (Sounds like the way many of act, doesn't it? We eagerly profess our love for Christ but rarely spend much time thinking about ways to please him.)

Christianity is not, first of all, a demand. It is a gift. It does not say first, "Do this, go here, go there." It says: "Come and Receive." Claim your inheritance as children of God. In the famous words of theologian Paul Tillich, "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. First of all, God's grace is a gift. The doing comes after we receive the gift.

The word inherit should give us a clue to that truth, shouldn't it? We cannot do anything to inherit, can we? Have you ever tried getting yourself included in somebody's will? An inheritance is not an award for outstanding merit. It is not a payment for a job well done. It is not something which one earns or can deserve by one's own merit. An inheritance is a gift, a gift that is dependent upon someone else's efforts. You may receive a large inheritance not because you are smart or ambitious or talented, but because you had a grandparent who was. The Gospel is first of all a gift, not a demand.

2nd it helps if we understand what the New Testament means by eternal life. It is one of those tricky phrases in the Bible which requires some understanding. John defines it succinctly: "This is eternal life, that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." Eternal life is a life lived in the knowledge of God. It is not simply life stretched out forever and ever. For many, that would not be heaven. It would be hell. George Bernard Shaw once said that he could not bear the thought of an eternity of George Bernard Shaw. To say that one will go on living forever is an intolerable idea, especially if one isn't all that happy living now. That is why the Bible speaks of eternal life, not immortality. The dictionary defines immortality as: exemption from annihilation, and unending existence. This is emphatically not the goal of the Christian faith. That would not necessarily be a happy prospect. Some years ago there was a news item which noted that the governor of New York signed a bill outlawing capital punishment in that state. The news report said that when the news flashed over the television, the inmates on death row a Sing Sing seemed

more interested in watching the football game. A chaplain at Sing Sing said that the majority of the prisoners would prefer death to life imprisonment.

My point here is that mere Existence is not enough. There must be some meaning, some purpose to that existence. Can you think of anything worse than mere duration, the sort of existence suggested by a famous epitaph on a tombstone: "Don't bother me now; don't bother me never, I'm going to do nothing forever and ever." We make a distinction between living and merely existing don't we? The New Testament word Eternal refers to a quality of life lived in love and fellowship with God, and not merely a quantity of life stretched out forever. "Eternal Life" in Biblical terms is not a reward at the end of an arduous journey, like the America's Cup or Olympic Gold medal, it is the journey itself, and it is the road we take. It is not a lollipop we get for being good, but the sweetness of the Lord all along the way. And it is a gift of God. Jesus once said to His disciples, "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom."

3rd But Jesus did tell the man to do something, didn't he? In fact, Jesus told him several "Somethings." "Go Sell, Give, Come, Follow." Someone once said that his French was very good, all except the verbs. For many of us, our faith is very good, all except the verbs. And Jesus gave this man several verbs, several things to do. But he could not become a disciple; he could not even begin doing them until he rearranged his priorities, got over his idolatry, and gave his first loyalty to Christ and not himself. He could not open his hand to receive God's gift of grace until he first let go of his possessions. That he refused to do. And so he was lost to the Kingdom.

"Keep the commandment" Jesus said, and perhaps, under his breath, he said to himself: "keep the commandments and you will soon discover just how difficult keeping the commandments is." Luther said that the first purpose of the Law is to bring us to despair of our own worthiness of ever living up to it. The commandments are the basic rules of human behavior. They tell us how the game of life is to be played. And Jesus pushed them into even deeper levels of understanding. He told us that it was not sufficient just to refrain from committing murder; one must not even hate. One must not merely refrain from committing adultery; one must root out the evil desire itself. We know what is right, but we can't quite do it. We see the goal, but we can't quite reach it- not by ourselves. Then when we feel most hopeless, God can come and offer us hope. Indeed, that's what the Commandments are for- to drive us to God, to where we say like the tax collector in Jesus' parable: "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" And then comes the good news: Romans 5:8 says "But God showed His love toward us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Because of Jesus Christ, because of his Cross, we are all beneficiaries of a great and wonderful legacy. Because of him, the doors of heaven are open to us; all we need to do is to claim our inheritance.

