

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I spent most of my growing up taking long road trips. I've been pretty much everywhere west of the Mississippi in a car at one time or another. During summer vacation, my family would drive for three or four weeks all over the West meeting friends and family, seeing national parks, and on one memorable summer when I was about to enter fourth grade, going to Disneyland. Disneyland wasn't very close to my hometown outside of Anchorage, particularly when you drive by way of Kansas to visit grandparents, and so when we finally arrived in California after weeks of driving, the palm trees and coastline seemed like an oasis glimpsed in the distance by parched people wandering the desert.

Before we could enter the magical gates of the happiest place on earth, we did a quick stop in San Diego and Tijuana. You can buy anything in Tijuana. My brother picked up some bootlegged Madonna tapes, and I bought a sequined sombrero. My mom noticed that the leather shoes in Tijuana were much less expensive than back home, and so she marched us all kids and probably my dad into the shoe store to get new shoes for school. My eyes passed right over the reasonable brown loafers that my parents suggested, and instead, I set my heart on some mint green loafers that, in hindsight, were inappropriate and impractical for a fourth grader. Still, my parents caved — their resolve worn down by four straight weeks of driving across a continent with their children — and they let me have my mint green shoes.

The next day, as we were getting ready to go to Disneyland, I started putting on my new mint green loafers. Everyone in my family explained to me why this was a bad idea. They explained to me that wearing new leather shoes on a day likely to bring with it ten hours of talking will ruin feet. I wouldn't hear it. I insisted that I would be just fine and that I needed to wear my green shoes more than I had needed anything else to date. The parents relented and let me wear the shoes.

The first few hours were amazing. In fact, I don't think I noticed that my feet were in pain until about 3 in the afternoon. By four o'clock, I could hardly walk. My poor dad took pity on me and half carried me over to the Captain EO ride, where there were no lines, and you could sit in a trolley and watch Michael Jackson sing and dance in a futuristic costume over and over. I think we rode the ride four or five times to give my poor feet a chance to rest before the parade and fireworks.

I was obsessed with those mint green loafers. And it just about ruined one of the best experiences a fourth grader can have.

Last week in the pulpit, we tackled marriage, and this week we're tackling money. The Jesus of the Gospel of Mark is stern and gruff and fast. He lays into people left and right for things that don't really seem that bad to modern listeners. This young wealthy man comes up to him and asks about entering the kingdom of heaven. This young man is so faithful to the scriptures that he

perfectly follows all the ten commandments and the laws of Moses. And so, with very little explanation, Jesus tells him to give up everything he has and that only then will he be able to dwell with God forever. Who is able to exercise that kind of discipleship? In the story, Peter seems doubtful that he can do it.

Like Peter, I find these words to be unsettling. And I think that's perhaps how it is supposed to work. A harsh word like this can work on us like sand in our shoes or little hairs in our shirt after a trip to the barber. This Gospel is heightening our discomfort so that we will take a serious and sober look at our relationship to stuff, our relationship to money. Earlier in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus talks about the "deceitfulness of riches." And I think this is an apt phrase. There is something wired in our human nature to be distracted by those things that glitter: the shiny, the precious, the mint green loafers. Maybe it is because we know that we will be dust one day. Or maybe it's a flaw built into our DNA. In any event, we have a tendency to lust for stuff. And then we listen carefully to the little lies that stuff tells us. The deceitfulness of riches indeed.

Money cannot tell you who you are. It cannot make you good or righteous. It cannot create able parents or loving siblings. It cannot do anything for your soul or your character. It is a tool, and it does not impress our God. We humans are not naturally good with riches. We like to melt them down and turn them into idols for worship. Or we like to hoard them like a dragon and keep them away from the poor.

Jesus interrupts all this and tries to offer us a real, sober, and difficult glimpse of our relationship with wealth through the eyes of this young rich man.

When the story is over, we have to wonder: what did he do? Did he release his wealth and follow Jesus? Did he decide that this was too much to handle? Did he maybe give away SOME of his money but keep the rest? Did he become Buddhist? We have no idea. But to wonder about how he went about his life is also an invite to wonder how we are going to go about our lives. What will our relationship be to wealth? And how will that inform how we are faithful Christians.

To fix yourself on the pursuit of things is to risk being crippled. Just ask my fourth-grade self who couldn't walk after developing some impressive blisters in my beautiful new shoes. Something about the pursuit of those shoes left me bereft of good sense and of perspective. Little idols work just as insidiously as big ones. They arrest our gaze and ask for our worship. They cripple. And, in the end, we are lessened or hurt because of them.

You have in your soul room for the worship of just one God. Choose wisely. And if you don't, the God who never gives up on we sinners will shake you up and ask you to try again. Every time. Amen.