

The Poor Little Rich Boy

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Sermon for October 12, 2003

Lessons for Pentecost 18, Proper 23 in Year B

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Psalm 90:12-17

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

Everybody loves a good algorithm. A nice general rule that you can apply in just about all cases, without really having to do a whole lot of thinking. Take, for example, traffic rules. We all know that when it comes to traffic lights, green means "go", red means "stop", and if you're from Jersey, yellow means "floor it."

But because an algorithm is a **general** rule, there are times when it's not applicable, and woe to the person who tries to use the algorithm in a situation when it doesn't work. I'm betting that there are a number of husbands here right now who've had a trusted algorithm or two blow up in their faces.

You've read your John Gray and Deborah Tannen, and you've finally learned that when your wife tells you about a problem she has, she doesn't want you to come up with solutions or try to fix it for her. All she wants from you is empathy while she vents. So you made a little algorithm for yourself about this and everything was fine until the day you emphasized with her about that flat tire she complained about, instead of fixing it for her. Go figure.

As I said before, we like algorithms because they save us from having to decide

what to do every time the same situation comes up. They free us to devote our mental energy to things that really need it.

And because we've seen how useful algorithms are, we like to use them as often as we can, and nowhere is this more apparent than in our religious life. It's filled with algorithms that we've learned starting from our earliest days in Sunday School. We apply these algorithms to our lives, often without even thinking about them.

The problem is that they're often misapplied. Sometimes it's just a case of our not understanding that what Mrs Olsen taught us in 3rd grade was a simplified version of a much more complicated, but still useful algorithm that she hoped we'd take the time to understand more fully when we were older.

Sometimes the algorithm doesn't take into account the background of the story and the specifics of the particular situation that spawned it, so we go on merrily applying them to situations that are similar in appearance, but wholly different in substance.

And sometimes the algorithm is just dead wrong.

We like to take stories from the Bible and make algorithms from them to apply to modern life without considering the specifics of the people involved in the story. And this is based on an often-used algorithm that says that you can find the answers to all your questions in the Bible.

So now that I've set you up, what's my point? It's very simple: too many of us take the wrong message from the story of the rich young man and Jesus. And because too many of us take the wrong message, too many of us give this wrong message to others. Instead of spreading a message of hope and joy, we end up spreading a message of inadequacy and failure.

Are you ready to follow me? Then let's go!

A lot of us look at this story, and immediately figure that to be a real follower of Jesus, one worth mentioning, you have to give up everything you have and go work with the missionaries in some foreign land, or with the poor right here at home. Why? Because that's what Jesus said to the rich young man, and we've made an algorithm out of it. Did Jesus say this to Joseph of Arimathea, whom Matthew mentions as being rich? Rich enough, in fact, to have owned the newly hewn tomb in which Jesus was laid.. Did he say it to any of the other well-off people who helped support his mission? No - he says it to one person, and all of a sudden we have a general rule. A general rule, which, based on the houses I've been in and the cars I've seen, most of us at King of Kings are not applying to ourselves.

But that's, of course, because we rationalize that **we're** not rich. Bill Gates is rich. We're simply middle-class.

Right. Try telling that to the person living in the shadow of old Saint Paul's on the near West Side or in El Salvador.

But this sermon is not about making you feel guilty for your good fortune. Enough people have done that with this lesson. This sermon has **good** news in it for you. But you'll have to wait for it.

What are the specifics of this young man's story, and why can we not turn it into a general algorithm? Or better, how can we avoid turning it into the **wrong** algorithm?

Consider first that the young man came to Jesus asking how he could **inherit** eternal life. Some translations use the word "earn" here, and this should immediately be a red flag to us. Why? Because we know that we do not earn or inherit eternal life. There is nothing we can do to get it. But rather, it's a free gift from God.

So what was going on here? Was our friend here merely not aware that things had changed, or was he trying to engage in a bit of shameless self-promotion?

I don't know. I don't pretend to know what was going on in his mind. But you do have to admit that it looked like he was tooting his own horn there in saying how he had kept all the commandments from the time he was a child. It certainly looks like he was saying, "OK, I've done it all, do I get the prize now?"

It is precisely **then** that Jesus hits him up with the bit about selling all his possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor. It's when he's standing there waiting for a pat on the back and confirmation that he's **done** enough to **earn** his way in, that Jesus says there's more to be done.

And on hearing this he walks away.

But the story's not over yet. For you see, there are two other things going on here. The disciples are shocked about this. They're shocked when Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Why are they shocked? Because they shared a preconception that so many people today still share - that abundance is a sign of God's blessing. They thought this despite knowing people who had amassed their riches in less than honest ways, and we continue to think this way. If I'm fortunate enough to have all this stuff, it must be because God likes me. Um, maybe not. The disciples worried that if someone who was so obviously "blessed" wasn't guaranteed a spot in the kingdom, then who could possibly get in?

That's when Jesus hits them with the rest of the story when he says:

For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.

You see, it's not up to us. It's up to **God**. As I said earlier, we all know that eternal life is God's free gift to us, and that we cannot earn it. This was news then, and it still is today.

So - where does that leave us? Do we have to sell all our possessions and give the proceeds to the poor? Do we all have to live in hovels? Are we not true Christians if we're living comfortable lives? What's up?

Perhaps it's time to interject a few military concepts here. In any battle there

are two main groups of troops: those on the front lines and those way behind in support. As important as the frontline troops are, their lives depend on the work done by the support troops who live in relative safety and comfort.

Most of us here are not frontline troops in Christianity or helping those in need. Most of here have not been **called** to be among the frontline troops, and never will be. But we all have very important roles to play in support, as minor and inconsequential as they may seem to us.

There are so many ways that we're all interconnected that all of us leaving our jobs right now to go out on the frontlines could actually have disastrous effects for the very people we're trying to help, because then there would be no one left to do the support work. There would be no one left to provide the things that the poor need.

Let's go back to Bill Gates for a moment. Just think, had he sold his possessions and given everything to the poor, the Gates Foundation might not be around to try to improve healthcare in developing countries. And the good that he's able to do as a result of all of our continued software purchases is perhaps more than he would've been able to do had he sold all his stock long ago.

But before you take this to the opposite extreme, this doesn't let us totally off the hook. Most of us could stand to be a lot more generous, especially since we are nowhere near as generous with each other as God is with us.

Still, we need to remember that this generosity is not something we do to try to earn God's favor. Rather, it's a thankful response to what he's already done for us.

So let's now return to our friend, the rich young man. His story comes from Mark's Gospel. There are some who maintain that the rich young man in the story was Mark himself, and that he eventually did do what Jesus said he needed to. Apparently Jesus had something very specific in mind for this young man.

We're not all called to "write the Gospel, so they'll still talk about us when we've died,"

but Jesus does have something particular in mind for each of us.

Bearing that in mind, our algorithm should be that when we hear Jesus calling us, we should follow him and do what he says, even if it's different from what we expect. In fact, we should expect to be surprised by what he wants.

This is most certainly true.