

## “Overflowing with Money”

Mark 10:17-31

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I attended a spiritual retreat where on the opening night they gathered us all together, 30 or 40 of us, put us in a circle, and asked us to answer a question. The idea was that in answering the question, the others in the group would learn something about us. The question was, “What has been a defining moment in your life?” It’s been nearly twenty years since we sat in that circle and talked about defining moments, so I can’t remember everything that was said.

But I do remember I was with a friend, and he told of leaving home when he was 19, going to California to be a surfer, and sort of turning his back on his family, his mom and his dad. Through a series of events, typical ups and downs a 19-year-old might experience as they pursued the life of being a surfer in that oasis called the west coast, he came to realize he wanted to be back with his family. When he finally got back home, as he talked with his mother, he found out she had prayed for him every day. His mother prayed for him every single day. She prayed that he would come home, that he would come back to his family. She prayed that prayer every single day. For my friend, knowing that his mother’s faith was so deep that she prayed every single day, because she loved her son, because she wanted her son home, that was a defining moment for him. That changed his life, the direction of his life, the purpose of his life, and the focus of his life. That defining moment led him to put his faith in Jesus Christ.

Another man told of having a big, successful business, making lots of money and having influence and power because he was a successful businessman. Then the business went south. The man was running his business in Houston, and lots of businesses went south in the 1980s, which in Houston is simply known as The Bust. Bankruptcies and foreclosures were everywhere. During this downturn in his life as a

businessman, when he lost his money and many of his material possessions, he found that the one thing that did not fail when his business failed and the economy failed, the one thing that did not fail during this difficult time was God. God was there for him in ways he had never imagined. That defining moment led him to rededicate his life to Christ, and to rededicate his life to Christ in ways that were more meaningful, more significant, more honest, and more trusting.

Others talked about loss. For several that night a divorce or failed relationship was a defining moment. Some had faced a serious illness, or the serious illness of a loved one. Some had lost a spouse or a child. Some had failed in a way that deeply hurt others. As I listened, I realized there are numerous events that can become a defining moment. What defined each of these defining moments, was that the individuals that night, in that circle, at that retreat, had all found God as a result of their defining moment. They had all found God in a deep and personal way.

I make mention of a defining moment because this morning in our passage of scripture we meet a man who meets Jesus, and his meeting with Jesus becomes his defining moment. Actually, we meet a man who meets Jesus, and his meeting with Jesus becomes a missed opportunity, because he fails to embrace what surely would have been one of the most remarkable defining moments in the pages of Scripture.

What do I mean when I say the man missed the opportunity for a remarkable defining moment? By definition, this man is known as the Rich Young Ruler. His encounter with Jesus is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. His life is defined by this description. He is rich. He is young. He is a ruler. In Matthew 19 we are told the man was young. In Luke 18 we learn he is a ruler. And all three gospels agree in this one respect, the man was wealthy. If you had to be defined by three things, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to be defined by youth, by power, and by wealth. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to be defined as the Rich Young Ruler. Measuring by human standards at least, it would not be the worst thing in the world to be defined as the

Rich Young Ruler. And yet when the meeting ends between the young man and Jesus, when the young man chooses to be defined as the Rich Young Ruler, we are told he went away sad.

The man comes to Jesus as the Rich Young Ruler. He leaves the meeting as the same Rich Young Ruler. His sadness surely comes because even though he was rich, even though he was young, even though he was a ruler, he seemed to sense something was missing. The Rich Young Ruler came to Jesus because he wanted to learn how to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded to the question of, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” by directing the man’s attention to a portion of the commandments, the ones about murder, adultery, stealing, giving false testimony, defrauding your neighbor, and honoring your father and mother. On all these counts the Rich Young Ruler declared he had been faithful. He says, “I have kept all these commands since I was a boy.”

Here is a Rich Young Ruler, a man seeking after eternal life, a man who kept all the commands since he was a boy. What could be wrong with this story? We might really wonder what could be wrong when we are told that upon hearing the man’s answer about keeping all the commands since he was a boy that Jesus looks at the man and loves him. What in the world could be wrong with this story? Looking at the man and loving him, Jesus then tells the Rich Young Ruler, the man seeking after eternal life, the man who has kept all the commands since he was a boy, “One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” What could be wrong with this story becomes all too obvious, all too evident when the man’s face falls. What could be wrong with this story jars us and causes us to pay close attention, for the man turned and went away sad. He went away sad because he had great wealth.

We are entering the season of stewardship at the Dunn’s Corners Church. We are continuing with our theme of overflowing, a theme that has explored how God causes our lives to overflow with goodness,

blessing, wonder, and forgiveness. Now we turn to money. Today we look at a passage about someone whose life overflows with money. Unlike the other things that God causes to overflow in our lives, things like goodness and blessing, wonder and forgiveness, there is an alarm that sounds concerning money. When our lives are overflowing with money, we might well be in a very challenging place spiritually. We might be in a place of great danger. We might be in a place like the man in our story today. We might be in a place where our overflowing money causes us to be defined by our wealth instead of our relationship with Jesus Christ.

The stage is set when the Rich Young Ruler comes to Jesus. This could be his defining moment. Jesus looks at the Rich Young Ruler with love. Jesus looks at the Rich Young Ruler who is seeking eternal life. Jesus looks at the Rich Young Ruler who has kept all the commands since he was a boy. Looking at the Rich Young Ruler with love Jesus gives the man the chance, the opportunity, the critical moment to choose Jesus over his riches, over his youthfulness, and over his power. If that Rich Young Ruler had made the choice to follow Jesus, his life would have been defined by his faith, by his obedience, by his trust, and by his willingness to put Jesus first above all else. Instead, he walked away from what would surely have been a remarkable and amazing defining moment. Later Jesus will tell his disciples how remarkable that moment could have been. It would have been equal to a camel passing through the eye of a needle. But no. The man, with sadness in his heart, turns and walks away. As he leaves, he remains defined by those terms that might sound so good to the people who judge things by the standards of this world, but for those who have come to know the amazing grace of Jesus Christ, the man leaves with a life defined by things that do not last. He leaves Rich. He leaves Young. He leaves a Ruler. But he leaves without Jesus, and we assume he leaves without eternal life. He leaves Jesus, and in leaving Jesus, he remains defined as the Rich Young Ruler.

How do we respond to a story such as this? This is not the only story in the bible about money, about wealth, about resources. This story

is not a mandate that every single one of us sell every single thing we have and give every single thing to the poor. The scriptures are filled with positive examples of how people use their resources to build up the life of the community and to look after the needs of those who struggle. Jesus himself, in one of his most challenging parables, talks about giving some from what we possess. In the parable of the sheep and goats he does not tell us to sell everything. But from what we have he does call us to help clothe the poor, to help feed those who hunger, to give drink to the thirsty, to show hospitality and welcome to the stranger, to use our time to visit those who are sick or in prison. The wise and generous use of our resources is a central teaching, but that is different than a command to sell everything.

Nevertheless, that does not give us permission to ignore this particular story. This story can become a defining moment not just for the Rich Young Ruler. This story can become a defining moment for you and for me and for the church that calls Jesus Christ Lord. Andy selected as our closing hymn an old favorite of the church. When we get to that closing hymn and we begin to sing, please make note that the chorus does not say, "I surrender some...I surrender a little bit...I surrender 1/10..." The chorus does not even say I surrender a lot...the chorus does not say I surrender most...the chorus does not say I surrender almost all. When we sing, we sing words that say, "I surrender all." How we surrender all might look very different, as different as the many examples of how people surrender to Jesus that fill the pages of the gospels. But how can we surrender less than all? In the words that define the people of faith in both the Old and the New Testament, we are called to love God with...all our heart...all our soul...all our mind...and all our strength. All. We surrender all.

So just like I did with a group of folks many years ago, I want to invite you to think about a defining moment in your life. I want you to think not just of any defining moment. Instead, I want you to think about this Rich Young Ruler and the defining moment he missed, the defining moment he turned his back on, the defining moment that slipped through

his hands. Have you experienced some defining moments in terms of stewardship, defining moments where people came awfully close to saying to Jesus, “I surrender all”?

We were leading a ministry with college students back in California. The students had all come from other places to attend school. As they grew in faith a bond developed among the students, and they became a close-knit community. One of the kids found out his mom was very sick. His mom lived on the east coast. He was bummed out because there was no way he could afford to get out to see her. The plane ticket was just too expensive, especially as a college student. The group heard about his situation. A spontaneous movement began, and that group of college kids took an offering. I knew those kids well. I knew they never had any money. I knew that by some strange coincidence they always showed up at our house right around dinner time, and just happened to be able to stay and eat with us. When I heard they were taking an offering I thought, well, that ought to raise enough to buy a hamburger and a coke. But no, there was enough to buy the kid an airplane ticket, and when he flew out to see his mom it was like a radiant beam of the sun shined into his darkness. Watching those college students dig deep and go without things and spread the word to others, that became a defining moment for me, for Julie, and for those students. Their faith mattered to them. Their friend, a brother in Christ, their friend mattered to them. In their own way, as poor and broke college students, they came together and they surrendered all so that their brother in Christ could make the trip to see his sick mother.

Sitting in church can lead to a defining moment. I did a memorial service several years ago for John, a man who passed away here in Westerly. I met with John’s sister to plan the memorial service. As we visited, I asked her something that struck me as curious. In the obituary it said John was the son of Donald and Margaret Brown and Edward and Barbara Perkins. I asked his sister about this. She said that when John was around ten years old, he lost his parents, Donald and Margaret Brown. At ten years of age John needed a home. Kathleen Perkins,

John's sister, said she remembered sitting in the pews at Christ Church when they made an announcement that a ten-year-old boy needed a home. She said her parents talked about it and decided they would open their home. They opened their home, they opened their heart, and Kathleen soon had a new brother, Ed and Barbara Perkins had a new son, and John had a new family. Right there in the middle of church Ed and Barbara Perkins heard God calling and they answered that call. They said, "I surrender all."

John might have been familiar to many of you. John worked at the Dunn's Corners Market. Julie said John was always the friendliest person you could meet. He knew what she liked, and he would give her a big smile and ask if she was in to pick up the usual. Others had the same experience. Tony and Cheryl Spino run Dunn's Corners Market. They treat their folks there like family. When John died, the Spinos called and said they wanted the church to host the memorial service. And for the reception, the market would supply all the food. Like they have done so many times for our church and for the community, when John passed away Tony and Cheryl immediately gave a costly gift to make sure things were taken care of. Tony and Cheryl know about that song, "I surrender all."

Back in the summer of 2019 our congregation sang a couple of verses of that old hymn. Mary Slattery heard that a man needed a kidney transplant. She heard God nudging her and saying, "You." She went through all the tests, she was a match, one day in the hospital they took a kidney out of Mary and put it in the man, and a defining moment like that is not one you soon forget. That same summer Linda Olsen introduced a friend at Chapel in the Pines. Linda received a heart transplant several years ago, and because of that we are blessed to have her warmth and kindness as part of our life together. The woman Linda introduced at the Chapel was the mother of the girl whose heart was given to Linda. That woman's daughter, in giving the gift of life to Linda, she really did surrender all. Offerings like this, although they are not monetary, offerings like this are the kind of things that exemplify our

faith. Offerings like this put our faith into practice. Offerings like this make a lasting impact. Offerings like this are defining moments. I hope and pray that you have experienced some defining moments that have stirred your faith and inspired you to say to Jesus, “I surrender all.”

If we change the traditional title of this story just a little bit, it helps us see that this passage of scripture truly is a defining moment. If we make the smallest of changes, just adding one letter, an s, we see how this story is a defining moment filled with meaning and significance. All we have to do is call this the story of the Rich Young Rulers. We know from experience with this story who the first Rich Young Ruler is. Who is the other Rich Young Ruler? Jesus. Jesus was around thirty years old, young enough so that when he stood up in the synagogue or went back to his home town, people talked about him in relation to his parents and his family. He was Joseph’s son and that kind of thing. Jesus was young. Jesus was rich. All the heavenly wealth, all the heavenly resources belonged to him. And Jesus was powerful. Jesus did the miracles he did, and he could have done the miracles he chose not to do, like turning stones to bread and leaping from tall buildings in a single bound. Jesus was also a Rich Young Ruler. But unlike the Rich Young Ruler who is still defined by those three words, by the words rich, young, and ruler, Jesus used his life to model a different type of defining moment. Jesus surrendered. We might sing, “I surrender all,” but Jesus, the richest and the most powerful, Jesus surrendered all his heavenly resources and he put aside all his heavenly power. Jesus surrendered all.

As one of the Rich Young Rulers in our story today turns his back and walks away, the other Rich Young Ruler makes his own turn. The Rich Young Ruler named Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem. If we call ourselves followers of Jesus, let us see how he defines his life. Jesus defines his life not in terms of what he can gain, but in terms of what he can give away. Jesus defines his life not in terms of his own well-being, he defines his life in terms of our well-being, in terms of our salvation, in terms of our redemption. Jesus surrenders all.

Philippians 2 tells us that we should have the same attitude as Jesus, the same attitude as the one who surrendered all. “Being in very nature God...talk about power, talk about possessing all things...being in very nature God, Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; instead, he emptied himself, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.”

Jesus Christ chose to surrender his life. That was his defining moment. Maybe this morning will be a defining moment for you.” The Rich Young Ruler walked away with his wealth, walked away with his youth, walked away with his power and authority. But the Rich Young Ruler walked away without Jesus. The defining moment for the Rich Young Ruler was that he walked away without Jesus. This morning I pray that our defining moment would be very different from the one for the Rich Young Ruler. I pray this morning that we will walk with Jesus. I pray that we will follow Jesus. I pray that we will trust Jesus with all our heart and our soul and our mind and our strength. I pray that we will say to Jesus, “I surrender all.” A defining moment like that will change your life for the better, and it will change your life forever.