

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 10, 2021 (Proper 23, Year B)***

The side door. We heard a lot about the side door when that college admissions scandal broke a couple years ago. Rick Singer, the chief architect of this scheme, talked about the three ways kids get into college. The front door, which is how people are normally admitted, through academic merit or athletic scholarships. The back door, which is what happens when your parents buy a library. And the side door, which was Singer's bread and butter. The side door was a way in that guaranteed admission for unqualified kids through bribes and deceit and more bribes. Cheating on the SATs, paying off coaches and college administrators, fake charities, money laundering. And it all came tumbling down, taking some celebrities and a bunch of well-heeled parents with it.

Sometimes I think people look at heaven with a similar mindset. There's the front door, where you live a good life, make some mistakes along the way, but ultimately make the cut. There's a back door for billionaires who leave a bunch of money to fight world hunger in their will, even if they don't do much to help people while they're alive. And then there's the side door, where maybe you've been a pretty lousy person, but you figure if you grease St. Peter's palm, he'll just let you in. Like paying off a bouncer at a popular nightclub.

None of this is how it works, of course. God's compassion and love and grace is more than we can possibly imagine. There truly is a wideness in God's mercy. There's no limit on the acceptance rate. There are no deals to cut, no bribes, no middle men, no shortcuts.

Now, I'm not saying the rich young man in this morning's gospel was definitely looking to bypass the heavenly admission requirements. Perhaps his inquiry was entirely earnest. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" But when Jesus answers his question by dutifully listing off the commandments, you can almost hear the man rolling his eyes. He could have just said thank you and gone on his way. But instead he says, in effect, 'Yeah, yeah, I've done all that.' Or, technically speaking, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

He seems to be looking for a workaround. I mean, he's got means. He's rich. He's been able to get his way throughout his life and, perhaps he figures, why should the afterlife be any different? If nothing else, it does seem like he's looking at eternal life as if it's some sort of prize. Follow this formula, check these boxes, fill out these forms, here's your ticket to eternal life. And if that doesn't work, there must be a loophole, a side door.

But then Jesus, as he so often does, flips the narrative. "You lack one thing," he tells him. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...then come, follow me." Which sounds like less of the hoped-for side door, and more of a locked door. The man, we hear, is shocked by this answer and went away grieving, because he had a lot of things.

And it's shocking for us as well. Because we can't listen to this story without putting ourselves into the shoes of this rich young man. For we are all, in relative terms, rich. We live in the wealthiest nation in the world, in one of the wealthiest regions in that nation. We have a lot of

things. We come to church, we follow the commandments as best we can, and still, we hear, it's not enough. We lack one thing: "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor."

Now we can justify not doing what Jesus says here in all sorts of ways. He was speaking metaphorically. He was only speaking to that one particular man. We're not monks.

The reality is that this is not a text that can be wrapped up with a satisfying interpretive bow. It's messy and complicated and challenging. It raises more questions than it answers. Which mirrors what it's like to live out our faith in the world. The life of faith isn't a one-hour episode of Law and Order where everything gets resolved before the closing credits roll. It's more like an ever evolving book that never ends, where there's always another chapter to read. And at times, the ambiguity pushes against our natural desire for resolution.

But it's also often where faith resides. In the messiness and uncertainty and unresolved-ness of our lives. In the push and pull of seeking to follow Jesus, and yet always stumbling, always being distracted, never feeling as if we are doing enough or being enough to earn God's love. The thing is, our faith imposes upon us impossible demands. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor," yes. But also the seemingly simple command to "love God and love neighbor." We can do our best, but we can always love God and one another more fully, more faithfully, with more devotion.

At one level, the impossible demands of our faith make you wonder why you should bother at all? Sure, you can probably follow the commandment not to murder. But a lot of them are much less clear cut. Most of us don't bear false witness on a regular basis, but sometimes we do. And we likely honor our mother and father *most* of the time. But when it comes to faith, nothing is as well-defined as we might like.

The good news here is that even as we struggle with the ambiguities of our faith, even as we reflect on this dual call to follow Jesus and give away all our possessions, Jesus loves us. We hear, just before Jesus gives this young man this hard news, that he looked at him and loved him.

Even as you struggle with the impossible demands of your faith, as we all do, Jesus looks at you and loves you. He sees you, he sees your struggle, and he loves you.

It's easy to overlay our own ideas and perceptions on this man's motivations, as I've done, but we don't know what happens to him in the end. Does he fall away from his lifelong commitment to following the Law, figuring what does it really matter anyway? Does he end up giving everything away, like St. Francis? Does he just continue trying to be a good person while not fully embracing his faith? Does he end up as one of Jesus' disciples? We just don't know, which only adds to the intended ambiguity of this story.

Eternal life is not a prize to claim. It's grounded in the relationships we have, with God and one another. It's rooted in the way Jesus looks at us and loves us. And it's established in the ways in which we follow Jesus. There's no checklist. There's no side door. There's just loving God with all our heart and mind and soul; while simultaneously accepting and reveling in God's abiding love for each one of us.