

A sermon for the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on Sunday, 11 October 2009, based upon Mark 10:17-11.

Transformed from Certainty into Life

A birthday gift from family was a ticket to hear former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, at McCall Middle School last Friday night. I've been a great fan of Madeleine Albright for many years, and I can say she was even more spectacular than I'd imagined. She was quick-witted, funny, serious, and wicked smart. As you've doubtless heard, she's on the circuit with her new book entitled *Read My Pins*, a sequel of sorts to her memoir, but the focus of the book is her broaches, and the way she used her jewelry collection to reinforce foreign policy, or to send humorous, and sometimes not-at-all-funny, messages to other diplomats and world leaders.

Among the several questions Secretary Albright answered was one about President Obama. "How do you think the President is doing?" She answered like a diplomat and a democrat, but then she said something that really resonated. She said, "he's a confident leader, not a certain leader"--and she went on to extol the values of confident leadership, versus certainty. Certainty lacks humility, and portrays arrogance and entitlement.

In today's Gospel we meet a rich man who asks Jesus how to get eternal life. It's a good question. The problem for the rich man is that he assumed he could *acquire* the kind of life Jesus was teaching and living.

That's familiar to us. That if we work hard enough or save enough money, or do something well enough, we'll get there. It's a creed that our society encourages us to recite, but it's not the creed the gospel gives.

I'm not the only preacher to remind us that the Bible contains many warnings about the dangers of wealth. But in this text there's nothing which judges the wealthy man. To use Secretary Albright's language, it's true that he might have approached Jesus with a degree of certainty, but Jesus doesn't judge him. He simply says it like it is. The interaction begins with the narrator telling us something really key. It reads: "Jesus loved him."

So why does the rich man walk away grieving? Maybe he's saddened to know that neither his wealth nor his certainty will get him eternal life. Or, maybe the challenge of giving things up, or sharing wealth, was quite simply more than he was willing to hear, much less do. Life is not about our money, or our education, or our ability to get things done. Life is about giving so that we can receive; pardoning so that we might be pardoned; and dying so that we might have life. Thank you Saint Francis.

We have to be careful with Scripture so let's be clear that this excerpt is an invitation to two things: A relationship with the poor, and companionship with Jesus. It's like an alarm clock that rouses us from an early morning sleep. We're awakened to hear Jesus. He's not issuing commandments; he's not screaming in our ear with what we should do, or must do, nor is he scolding us for having too much, or doing too little. Instead, he's

sending invitations. We're invited. Think of the alarm clock as a gentle voice saying something like, "look at the world through my eyes" or "your definition of poverty is not mine."

Among the opportunities to serve here at The Epiphany is an invitation to real-life, face-to-face, how-do-you-do, in the flesh experiences with those who have less than we.

It's why we go apple picking *with* the people from Brookview House. We could just buy the apples and drop off baking pans of apple crisp. But the invitation is to go to the orchard with the women and children who live at Brookview House. We feel their delight, and ours, in eating a fresh apple, and in that moment somehow going to the mall doesn't seem so appealing.

There are other invitations too. Instead of dropping off the food at St. Luke's Church in Chelsea, we'll actually go there one Saturday each month to cook and to eat with new friends. The men and women and children walk through the doors of St. Luke's hungry for breakfast and lunch. We walk through the doors just as hungry, but the food we get is their generosity of spirit.

In Madeleine Albright's new book there is a 1997 photograph of her placing a wooden cross on one of the mass graves outside of Kigali. In the background are several Rwandan women watching her. The pin on her lapel is a gold dove. We all know about the blunders the United Nations made with the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and especially of Mrs. Albright's statements of regret and contrition. All the more poignant then is the photograph of a rich, entitled woman whose certainty was replaced with humility and apology, and whose wealth made her grieve.

God's friendship with the poor is not a rejection of the rich or even of the certain. We can claim this and walk in it.

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