

**THE OLD MEETING HOUSE
EAST MONTPELIER CENTER, VT**

November 6, 2011

**“Singing for Supper: Starvation, Salvation, and Chocolate Croissants”
Preached by the Rev. Elissa Johnk**

I have about five different sermons I want to give. Largely because this is the one time of year when it seems to be okay – even expected for us to talk about money. But I only get one. And so I’m going to tell you a story, which at the very least explains why the offering is so important to me, personally, theologically.

It happened a few years ago, while I was in Cambodia. I know I have recently spoken about my trip there – and perhaps it is the act of hanging my pictures that has it on my mind so much. But perhaps it is also because there is something about the developing world that forces us to confront our selves in a different way. So I want to tell you about how I understand this scripture differently, all because of a chocolate croissant.

Resting under its glass dome, it was irresistible. The crusty layers rising dramatically over a doughy center, rivers of chocolate peeking from its ends. Powered-sugared to perfection: not too much, not too little, just right.

It was the last of its kind – the last of any kind, really. 10 o’clock at night was not a good time to go pastry shopping in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Few things survive the tourist onslaught that many hours into the day – shops were closed up, their aluminum doors and chain locks sturdier than the flimsy tin walls they were protecting. Tonight there would be no sandwich, no pizza, no artfully combined dish of French and Cambodian flavors. There was only this pain au chocolate. And it was mine.

The rich man, eager to get into heaven, runs to Jesus, kneels at his feet, and asks “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Like any true inheritance, he knows, it cannot come for free. Jesus’ response is familiar: follow the commandments, honor your parents, do not murder, cheat, steal or lie. The man should have been relieved. He should have been overjoyed, he should have gotten up off his knees and wept with gladness. Most of all, he should have stopped there.

“Teacher,” he exclaims, still sunk deep onto his knees, “I have done all these things since my youth.”

The bread in my hand was delicious. I hadn’t yet tasted it, but I could tell. A connoisseur can judge by the way it perches on the hand – light on its outer edges, dense in the middle. At least that’s what I told myself as I waited outside the convenience store for my father to buy the fizzy, 20 ounce complement to our meal. Our novice legs had biked twenty miles that day, in the 100 degree heat, away from the city and into the jungle, getting caught in a monsoon, and losing ourselves in the mine-riddled outskirts

of Cambodia's ancient temples. This meal, incomplete as it was, was going to taste like heaven. The last pain au chocolate at the last open store was my well-earned reward, payment for my lack of panic, comfort after my time of trial.

Lost in my visions of gluttony (or was it lust?), I didn't see him approach. He walked softly in his sandals, the color of his skin the color of the dirt road, producing the illusion that he was part of the soil, that he had sprouted magically from the ground. He was young, no more than 10 years old, and on his hip he balanced a baby, so tightly cleaved to him that their bodies might as well have been one. His hair, badly chopped at unequal lengths, hung like straw over his eyes.

My gut dropped. I knew what was coming. He held out his hand.

Follow the commandments. If only the rich man had stopped there. Surely it was enough to have to have honored one's family, to have lived without deceit, to have honestly acquired all that you own. Surely it was enough because Jesus said it was enough.

Follow the commandments.

But it was not – is not – enough. Driven to that spot by something inside of him, his hard-working body lowered to the ground beneath the roaming preacher's dusty sandals, he needed to know the answer. 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' He knows it will be more than a rule to follow, more than a promise to keep, more than the letter of the law, more than he can face. He knows what the teacher will require of him. It is this knowledge that compels him to his knees.

'Teacher, I have done all these things since my youth.'

"Then go and sell what you have, and give it to the poor."

They say you should not give money to children who beg. Some of you have heard me say this before. The guide books, the state department, the NGOs that deal with child labor and safety – all the expertise that is boiled down to the amorphous authority "they" – warns against it. Due to the desperation there, children are taught to sing well, be extra cute, pose adorably in pictures, look 'authentic' and, most importantly, kept hungry to ensure they look like they need it. Money flies straight into adults pockets, disturbing the economic system and bypasses the children almost completely. Instead of money, the authorities suggest, give them food.

My eyes darted nervously from my perfectly powdered pain au chocolate to the baby's cloudy eyes. My reaction was instinctive. I dropped my hand into my pocket, pulled out my wallet, and gave him a five.

The scripture says his face fell. The scriptures say that when his price had been named, the rich man was unable to meet Jesus' eyes. His face fell, and he went away sad.

I know what it is to avoid someone's gaze. I know what it is to concentrate on dusty, sandaled feet so that you don't have to see the dark brown, knowing eyes. I know what it is to turn your back on someone so you don't have to see the reflection of yourself that lurks on their features.

For all the grace I have glimpsed at a kitchen table, for all the love that I have known in a shared meal, for all the sermons I have given on the breaking of bread, I should have known this is what it would come down to for me. The rich man's price was a fortune. My price was a pain au chocolate.

What is yours?

That is the question of the offering. That is the question of the pledge. Can you look Jesus straight in the eye, and pull out a five?

Jesus talks about money more than anything else, not, I would suggest, because he cares about it, but because *we* care about it. A lot. So much so that we don't ever want to talk about it. We use it as a barrier for all that hurts in the world. More often than not, what we have or don't have gets in the way of our relationship with others. Even if, like me, you were giving it away. I gave that little boy money to stop thinking about *his* needs. Keep your money, and you run the risk of denying someone life, quite literally bread. Give it away without thinking, and you run the risk of denying humanity – theirs, but also yours.

Offerings in temples and churches and synagogues have always been meant to help us reflect on this catch-22. A 10% tithe was expected from harvests, often the best 10% - the slaughter of the finest animal, the choicest grains. For many of the poor, it was the only time of year they would eat meat. It was meant as a reminder – that all that we have does not come from us, and does not belong to us. It was meant as a reminder that money, harvest, even security, *is not God. Is not relationship.*

It is this that I hope you will consider this week as you go home and contemplate your annual pledge: relationship. With God. With the world. With the people around you. What do you value, and what do you want to value? What does this place tell you about those relationships? About money? At what sights do you turn away?

At what price does your face fall?

It might not be a fortune; it might simply be a piece of bread that keeps you from looking God in the eye. And how might letting go help you maybe, just maybe, meet those eyes?

The rich man fell to his knees. He knew something was missing from his life, even though he had been so, so very good. Jesus named the price for salvation. Eternal life in its poetic language. But what that really meant was the price for that man's freedom. From what brought him to his knees.

Often we speak of church pledging as Stewardship, in the sense of caretaking, or maintenance of the earth, our resources, and its creatures. This is all well and good, and biblically and ethically imperative. It is necessary, once a year, to remind ourselves of the importance of this place; to re-dedicate ourselves to its people and mission. But if I could wish for one thing this year, it would be that stewardship might become *stewardship*, not simply of your financial resources, of our collective resources, but of your life. That it might be *stewardship of your faith*.

The offering is not primarily about this place, as lovely as it is. It is not, primarily, about the beautiful grounds, or the great music, or the phenomenal missions programs. It is not, primarily, about me singing for supper – mine or anyone else’s. God does not care about this building, beautiful as it is. God cares that **we** care about a place of sanctuary, of beauty. Of welcome. God cares about you. God cares about me. Facing down our demons together and building something better for ourselves and the world.

Like that rich man, I can’t quite make 10% just yet – responsible stewardship must, indeed, be responsible. But I am managing 5%. Not from guilt, but because what I learned that night was that God desperately, desperately wants me to invest in something larger than that single, delicious croissant. Larger than my family, and larger than myself. More important, I learned that I desperately want that, too.