

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – 2024

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Hebrews 3:12-19

Mark 10:17-22

An autopsy is done post-mortem. Post mortem is Latin and it literally means “after death.” An autopsy is performed for a number of reasons. The principal reason is to determine the cause of death. To help in identifying infectious disease and prevent its spread, to investigate a suspicious death, or to explain an unexpected death – these are all reasons why an autopsy is performed. Pathologists are the medical experts who perform an autopsy which is, sensibly enough, also called a “post-mortem.” Out of curiosity, I’ve read one or two post-mortem reports. The medical jargon is pretty thick and I can’t understand the technicalities of the reports. I don’t have anything against professional expertise but a translation of the jargon would be helpful for the layman who just wants to know why someone died. You and I won’t be reading our autopsy reports. Not everyone gets one, by the way. My driver’s license says that I’m an organ donor but that doesn’t mean that I’ll be receiving an autopsy.

How would you like to see your autopsy report? How would you like to see a report that traced the cause of death down to your behaviors, your choices, what you ate regularly, tracing the cause of death down to the nitty-gritty of your body? If you, by some time-warp phenomenon, could read your autopsy report, might that have a bit of an effect on your choices, your behavior *now*? You’d have to be a pretty cold fish for it not to. One of my favorite movies has a scene where a guy is going in for a triple-bypass the next day and he’s chowing down on the greasy foods at a party the night before and when one of his buddies questions the wisdom of this approach the guy replies: “I’m going in for a cleaning tomorrow, might as well load up on the fried stuff tonight.” How about a spiritual autopsy? For the spiritually dead; I wonder what one of those would look like. Most of us have had a physical. Part of a physical is the blood panel. You’re low on potassium and iron but your magnesium is looking good. How about a “spiritual” blood panel? Your charitable giving is up but you’re a terrible gossip and your relationship with the truth is periodically tenuous. How many of you would be up for taking a gander at your “spiritual” blood panel?

A man comes *running* up to Jesus and kneels before him. That’s a radical gesture. I have to believe that this young lad is sincere. “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). Jesus, the Son of God, had come to render up His life on a cross as an atoning sacrifice to pay for the sins of humanity with His suffering, with His blood, His death, to rise again and to establish His church, to convey His life to sinners through the Word and the sacraments, to save us by *grace* and this young lad runs up, kneels before the God of grace and asks Him what he must *do* to inherit eternal life. Confronted with this scenario, what’s our Lord going to do? “And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone’” (Mark 10:18). Why does Jesus speak this way? What’s He doing? He’s helping this young lad. He’s helping him to identify who it is that he’s speaking to. God has come to save *you*, young sir. But let’s try it your way for a bit, since you’re so hot to save yourself. “You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother’” (Mark 10:19).

Does the law give you eternal life? What do y'all think? How well have you kept the commandments? Do you know that the Bible says that if you break the law at a single point that you are guilty of breaking the whole thing? "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2:10). How many of y'all are perfect, in thought, word and deed perfect? Jesus wants the rich, young ruler to take a sober look at the law and measure it against his behavior and come to a simple conclusion. What's the conclusion? I don't measure up. The young lad is directed toward the law, since he's so keen to save himself, in the hope that he'll be honest, in the hope that he will recognize his need, in the hope that he will see that there is only One who is good and it's not him. What Jesus did with that young lad two thousand years ago is what He does with all of us. By His Word, by the Holy Spirit, we are confronted with the demands of God's law and our obvious short-comings. What's our reaction? What does your spiritual "blood panel" say in regard to hypocrisy, humility, self-righteousness?

Yes, there is only one who is good. "O give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good. And his mercy endures forever" (Psalm 136:1). The young lad's spiritual blood panel is about to take a hit. After hearing Jesus mention a goodly number of the commandments, after Jesus responds to the fellow's question about what *good thing he must do* to inherit eternal life, the guy seemingly brushes aside his need for a Savior. How does he do this? He does this by suggesting that he doesn't break any of the commandments. "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth" (Mark 10:20). It's self-deception, isn't it? Have you ever deceived yourself into believing that you're a cut above others? Have you ever deceived yourself into believing that you are above critique? St. Paul wrote this: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment" (Romans 12:3). "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

Jesus is going to attempt to break through the young lad's self-deception. It is a remarkable statement that St. Mark pens: "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'" (Mark 10:21). Jesus loved him as He spoke a diagnostic word that threw the young lad for a loop. Love brought a hammer to the man's heart. Love showed that fellow how enamored he is with the things of this world, how enamored he is with himself. You lack one thing. What do you suppose that you lack? Clearly, we all lack one thing, in and of ourselves. We lack righteousness. We lack perfection. We lack genuine and faultless love, we lack a pervasive humility, we lack a trust in God that has no caveat, no condition, no controlling impulse. Our spiritual blood panel would show such things dispassionately. We need a crucified and risen King. We need the forgiveness that comes through Christ's blood. We need God's grace. And thanks be to God, He gives it.

When the rich, young ruler heard Jesus' demand, do you know what his reaction was? St. Mark tells us. "Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Mark 10:22). That is his spiritual autopsy report. Who knows what happened later in his life, but if he continued that way his spiritual death is certain. His gesture at the beginning of this episode is a charade, a farce, an illusion of piety with no substance. The young lad's spiritual autopsy is grim. He went away sorrowful for he had great possessions.

How about Jesus' spiritual autopsy report? When He died there was a Roman soldier who proclaimed this: "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). The Centurion wasn't a pathologist but he nailed it. The earth shook when Jesus died (Matthew 27:51). The curtain in the Temple was torn in two when Jesus died (Matthew 27:51). Tombs were opened and some of the saints were raised when Jesus died (Matthew 27:52). He bore the sins of the world in His flesh. That's Jesus' spiritual autopsy. He was righteous. He is love incarnate. He is humility personified. His blood panel is immaculate. His power was made perfect in weakness. That is His spiritual post-mortem report. But He was stronger than death. His holiness decimated death. He is risen and His grace is the commodity that fuels your faith, fuels your love, fuels your life. He lives and that reality has transformed you. We die to self daily. We rise with Christ daily. We know the commandments and we endeavor to keep them. But we are saved by grace through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). How sweet that is!