At the swimming pool, a child ascends the diving platform, runs to the edge of the diving board, and with a mighty jump into the air hurls himself toward the waiting water, while yelling at the top of his lungs, “CANNONBALL,” the goal to make as big a splash as possible. This exuberant human cannonball is not at all like the athletes competing in Olympic diving, where the smallest amount of splash is highly valued. No, in this local community pool of children divers, the larger the splash the better. We would say of this child’s dive, “He is all in.”

At the poker table, a player eyes her hand of cards, calculates the odds and risks, scans the reads in the expressions of the other players at her table, and looks at her stack of chips. Then with a deep breath, she pushes her entire stack of chips across the table, risking everything on the odds that she has the winning hand. We say of her bet, “She’s all in.”
In our Gospel today, we hear Jesus calling a would-be follower to go “ALL IN,” in order to be a disciple. Mark says the man is rich (Luke adds that he is a ruler, and Matthew adds that he is young). He volunteers to join the band of disciples following Jesus, and is apparently a law-abiding decent fellow. Seems like a perfect candidate to be a follower, doesn’t he? Don’t you imagine the other disciples were thrilled to have such a rare and gifted person join them? Just imagine what they could do with his money, connections and influence! Who wouldn’t want a volunteer with good morals, who also brings great financial resources, to join their ranks? If he were to come to our church, we might invite him to chair the finance committee within just a few weeks! But Jesus stuns the man, and us, with his response—“sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and then you can follow me.” Unless we have heard this story so often we have rubbed smooth all its sharp edges, we should be stunned by this harsh-sounding prerequisite demand.
What does Jesus mean by this stern requirement? Throughout the Christian centuries, some have taken this command literally, and applied it to all who would follow Jesus. Many of the earliest Christians in the book of Acts literally sold their possessions and gave the proceeds to the apostles to distribute to those in need within the Church. Maybe this story was the motivation for them; or perhaps it was their sense of expectation that Jesus was returning very soon, rendering the typical obsession with possessions, or with marriage for that matter, obsolete. Even after that promised return of Christ ended up being much longer than originally expected, there have been many individuals and groups of believers who took this story literally, renouncing all claims to worldly material goods for the sake of following Christ. We think of hermits, or those took vows of poverty in sacred orders like Saint Francis, or contemporary communities like Koinonia Farm in Georgia.

Others have interpreted this passage of scripture, and the demand of Jesus to the rich man, to be merely symbolic or suggestive, as if it had nothing to do with money and possessions at all. This interpretation suggests that Jesus was just testing the man, exposing his weak spot,
illuminating his particular blockage to being a true disciple—i.e. his love and sense of self-worth tied up in his portfolio—but that it does not need to be taken literally by other would-be disciples. In support of this interpretation is the fact that Jesus did not require this exact same demand of other followers, such as Zacchaeus (who pleased Jesus when he offered to give up half of his worldly goods), or the teaching of the Apostle Paul (who instructed the Christians in the churches he established to set aside just a weekly portion of their wealth in order to raise an offering for the poor saints back in Jerusalem).

Perhaps the best way of hearing this passage is for us to remain open to all of these possible interpretations, as we apply this jarring text to ourselves. If we think it has only to do with money, or that it has nothing to do with money, we are likely to overlook some of the nuance and power of this saying. The truth is, all of us, whether we have a lot of money or very little of it, are tempted to place too much importance on our wealth. We can allow our minds and hearts to circle endlessly around this pursuit, and allow our sense of purpose and value to get tied
to the fluctuating numbers of a portfolio when the market tanks like it did this past week. We can even mistake our wealth as our god, trusting our own savings for our ultimate security. Certainly the good and godly blessing of material goods can morph into something bad for the soul. When that happens, or because all of us are vulnerable to this risk, we do well to remember that Jesus is talking about money here. This man trusted his wealth, needed his wealth, took security and identity from his wealth—more than he trusted, needed, or took security and identity from his relationship with God through Christ. In what way are we just like him? In those ways, precisely those ways, we do well to hear Jesus calling us out, exposing our false gods, and bidding us to a higher and more secure calling.

But this saying is not just about money either. In other words, the only way to hear this story is not to immediately go out and empty the bank account and sell all one’s possessions. It is possible, as many believers have demonstrated throughout the centuries, to live in primary obedience and trust in God, and allow one’s money to be in service to
God, taking the role of faithful steward of God’s abundance, directing and managing that abundance with a constant and joyous eye toward the purposes and presence of God in the world. (In fact, you are going to hear me talk about that shortly!) The truth is, money in itself is neither divine nor demonic. It is only the use of money, the relationship of the soul to money that is in question here. Take a quick inventory of your possessions; is there anything you would be unwilling to give up, to give away, if God asked it of you? Do you find your grip tightening even as I am talking about this topic right now?

For some who hear this passage of scripture, the proper question may be to ask, “If it is not money, what is the ideology or the person or the ambition that threatens to get between us and total obedience to God?” Is there anything we could not give up, if Jesus asked us to do so? Is anything so precious to us, as money was to this rich man in the Gospel lesson today, that we could not lay it at the feet of Christ, if he asked us to do it? If the answer is yes, this passage calls us to lay that item or person or dream on the altar of obedience, asking God if He has
some greater purpose or plan than the one we have for it. To fail to do
so is to stare this passage directly in the face, and hear the sad grief of
our Lord who simply thought and hoped better of us, and wanted better
for us. So here is the truth, the good news; God doesn’t need your
money. For one thing, it is already his. God can create more wealth in a
moment than we can ever accumulate or imagine. God wants to bless
his children, but also to invite us to join him in the surpassing joy and
purpose of wealth in the first place—that is, to bless others, to allow
some, and eventually all, of the blessings that have come to us, to pass
through us on their way to someone else. Only in this circle of
generosity is there any real joy, or any real peace, or any lasting wealth.
It is the way the portfolios of heaven are measured. When someone on
earth gets this, holding their portion of God’s abundance with a light and
generous hand, it is then that angels weep for joy, that someone went
**ALL IN**, and did with their abundance what God always does with His.

Literally… thank God he went **“ALL IN!”**