

Proper 23, Year B, Mark 10:17-31  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island, WA  
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I was ordained in 1982 and, before that, I worked for four years in supervised training as a seminarian. Over the years, I have served in inner-city, small town, and country parishes, together with several prisons – one of them a maximum security prison – and in many hospitals and health care settings. And – here’s where I’m going with this – along the way I had many intimate and confidential conversations with parishioners and others on just about any topic you can imagine. But one conversation I can never recall, except in the most general terms during our stewardship drives, is about personal wealth. Death and dying, adultery and incest, even murder, yes, but wealth, no. I’ve often wondered why this is the case. I suspect it has more to do with our American culture than our church culture, but I really don’t have a ready answer for why we seem to be so reluctant to talk about our wealth – and I include myself in this observation. That being said, one thing should be obvious to us from today’s gospel reading: Jesus didn’t suffer from this problem. He didn’t shy away from talking about wealth and today, if I’m going to be faithful to the Gospel, I can’t either. So, here we go.

First, some historical observations, which some of you have heard in previous sermons. Jesus’ world was economically *very* different than ours. There simply wasn’t a large middle class in the Roman empire; instead, there were a few rich people at the top whose wealth was based primarily on owning land or being connected to corrupt political patrons, while the masses of people we call peasants owned small plots of land that were barely large enough to sustain their families. Jesus himself may have been even lower than peasants in the social

hierarchy of his day. He evidently worked with his hands as a carpenter but, after he left that and began his public ministry, he may not have owned more than the clothes on his back. The implication for us, at least in this congregation, is this: no matter where we fall on the contemporary scale of wealth, in Jesus' eyes, we would be counted as wealthy.

Second, turning to the Gospel lesson, note the response that Jesus gives to this wealthy Jewish man who, seemingly without a thought to his own privileged social status, literally runs up and kneels in the dust before Jesus and asks what he must do to find salvation. Surprisingly for many Christians, Jesus tells him to follow the Jewish Law, the Torah, as any Jew should do. And what may be more astounding to us is that Jesus accepts his response: the man claims he's done this, that he's followed the law from his youth, and Jesus does not dispute his claim. We can imagine Jesus, as the passage says, "looking at him" and loving him. Jesus then says – gently, I think – "You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Third, many Christians through the centuries have interpreted this statement to mean that Christians simply should not be wealthy or should not seek wealth. Indeed, monastic and other non-monastic orders, such as the Franciscans we heard about last week, grew up in response to the church's often-corrupt interactions with the Roman Empire after Constantine. They believed that poverty is required if one truly wants to be a follower of Jesus and to find salvation. We heard a quote from Saint Clare this past Sunday who wrote, "...the kingdom of heaven is promised and given by the Lord *only* to the poor" [emphasis added]. God help us, if that's true! With the disciples, we might reasonably ask "Then who can be saved?"

I don't have time to pursue the history of Christians and wealth this morning, but you might explore on your own how views changed in through time on charging interest on loans and how Protestant Reformers tried to articulate the notion of secular vocations – and by secular, they meant our work or careers that are not directly tied to the church or holy orders. We have been greatly influenced by their arguments though we continue to struggle with the tension between the pursuit of wealth and our Christian faith.

So then, where does this leave us? I've already suggested that I don't believe we should generalize Jesus' statement to every Christian, though we should be quick to acknowledge that some of us may indeed be called to voluntary poverty as part of our vocations. But that isn't enough to explain why we should both care about our wealth as Christian stewards and treat it with some suspicion, that is, as a possible trap for us, regardless of how we understand our vocations. What follows is my too-brief attempt to address these issues.

Christians believe that God created humans both as free agents and as rooted in the natural world. Thus, though we are free to make choices, we are not protected from the consequences of our own choices or the choices of others, nor are protected from the indifferent effects of nature – just watch the news any given day to be reminded of these things. So, of course, we take steps to protect ourselves from the contingencies and uncertainties of life, and the accumulation of wealth is one way to do this. In this sense, then, the accumulation of wealth is a good thing, but there are limits on it. Our highest good, that is, God's notion of our ultimate good, is communion with Godself. Our freedom to make choices is also a very important good for God, for we cannot truly love God or our neighbor without freedom – true love requires freedom. And, while God does not promise

to protect us from human or natural evils, God does create and sustains the *conditions* that enable us to realize our own human goods, and God may even guide us in realizing our good should we seek that guidance. The bottom line for this argument is that our success in amassing wealth is simply not promised to us by God and if we are successful it is not a sign that God prefers us over any other human being. As Jesus said, the rain falls on the just and the unjust, and God loves the poor as much as God loves the rich; moreover, those of us who are better off retain a moral responsibility to use our wealth and freedom to aid the poor. As an aside, one implication of this is that there is no room in Christian theology for what some call the Prosperity Gospel. That, I believe, is a corruption of our faith.

Stated in spiritual terms, saints and theologians have talked about wealth, along with other human needs and wants, as one among many of our desires. These desires often get grouped into three categories: desires of the body, the intellect, and the heart. Saints and theologians have also argued, as I mentioned above, that realizing or achieving our desires will ultimately never satisfy us. But they also argue that this is a good thing in itself, for it can keep us from making our desires into idol, that is, of substituting our good for God. So, seeking our desires can be good until seeking them begins to distract us from seeking our ultimate good in a loving relationship with God, a relationship that involves our total selves – our bodies, our intellects, and especially our hearts. And so, this understanding can be a *test* of how we should seek and use our wealth: At any point in which the pursuit of wealth (or any other human desire, for that matter) keeps us from loving God – God who alone can ultimately satisfy our desires – and loving our neighbor as ourselves, at that point we need to stop and reexamine our desires, and the goals and behaviors we use to reach them.

To conclude, I admit that's a lot to stuff into one sermon, but it does approach, I hope, what Jesus was trying to teach us. God loves us and desires good for us, but when the desire for our own good gets in the way of our relationship with God and service to our neighbors, then it's time stop and take stock of what we're doing. Wealth is one of those goods, Jesus tells us, that can easily get in the way. It can indeed be very hard, as Jesus said, for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. "It is easier for a camel to go through and the eye of a needle." But thankfully, he also says it's not impossible. Amen.