

THE RICH MAN AND OUR MONEY

Sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Dr. Titus Presler
in Grace Church, White Plains, N.Y.,

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Year B, Proper 23 (RCL): Amos 5.6-15; Psalm 90.12-17; Heb. 4.12-16;
Mark 10.10.35-45

“Jesus, looking on him, loved him!”

What an extraordinary declaration: Jesus *loved* the man who had come to him running and kneeling.

Whatever else we learn from this picture of the rich man, let us gaze in wonder at Jesus loving this earnest inquirer.

Jesus did not dismiss him, condescend to him, despise him or scorn him

Jesus *loved* him, which is to say that

Jesus saluted him for his yearning,

Jesus honored him for his devotion,

Jesus had compassion for him in his anguish of spirit.

As the writer to the Hebrews declares to us today: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

The evangelist Mark presents a compelling picture of the man

running up to Jesus, kneeling before him, and asking,

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The man was full of yearning and longing for eternal life – but what *is* eternal life?

Yes, it is assurance of life after death, but in its essence it is that life which is eternal by virtue of its being lived in community with God,

because everything touched by God is marked for eternity,

and such life begins not simply at the portal of death.

It begins in the here and now of our living on earth.

So the man's question was not simply “What can I do to be safe from damnation?”

but the questions we all have as we live:

What can I do to be close to God?

What can I do to live into my full humanity?

What can I do to be truly fulfilled? —

fulfilled in my emotional life

fulfilled in my intellectual life

fulfilled in my relationships

fulfilled in my spirituality

How can I live life in its fullness?

The premise of the man's question was that God has something to do with all these longings,

for he asked, “What must I do to inherit *eternal* life?”

So Jesus went through a catechism of the commandments with him:

“You know the commandments: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.”

The man had kept all these, but still eternal life seemed beyond his grasp, his relationship with God seemed unresolved, he felt he was not living into the fullness of life which God intended for him, still he was dying on the vine.

It was at that point, Mark says, that Jesus' love went out to him:

Jesus saw his earnestness,
 Jesus respected his righteousness,
 Jesus recognized his deep desire to live into God –
 and he loved him for it.

It was out of that love that Jesus said the hard thing:

“You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven;
then come, follow me.”

Jesus discerned and identified what was separating the man from God, and he asked him to give that up so that he could be close to God, and that closeness to God would be the eternal life that the man sought.

Jesus did not say that hard thing to everyone he met, not even to every wealthy person he met, for in quite a few instances Jesus simply accepted hospitality and provision from people who were wealthy or, at least, well off.

This word was to this particular person, because in him Jesus discerned what was separating him from the eternal life he sought.

Yet Christians throughout the ages have rightly discerned that Jesus' words to this man signify that the call to discipleship must in some way affect our relationship with possessions and money.

Christians throughout the ages have rightly discerned that Jesus' words warn all of us that possessions and money have the potential to separate us from the eternal life for which we long, that life that Jesus has promised to us.

And so it is today, as Grace Church enters the season of considering the call each of us has received to steward faithfully all that God has given us.

With Christians throughout the ages we wrestle today with the impact of Jesus' words on our lives, our faithfulness, our stewardship.

Do you identify today with the man who came running and kneeling before Jesus?

– with his longing, with his yearning for God,
 with his wondering about what it will take to be truly fulfilled in God?

Know that just as Jesus looked on that man and loved him
 Jesus looks on you and loves you.

In the safety of that love, let's consider how Jesus responded to the earnest rich man and consider Jesus' words in light of what money is.

First, I suggest, money is an expression of value.

The world is full of things we value –

we value things in different ways or for different reasons –
 the value we attach to groceries is different in kind from the value we attach to
 listening to a piece of music or the value we attach to a comfortable chair;
 the value we attach to a vacation is different kind from the value we attach to a
 painting or to having a sanctuary like this one in which to worship;
 a library is valuable in a way quite different from how a car is valuable.
 – so there are different kinds of value,

And among all the different kinds of value there are many different levels of value:

a McDonalds meal differs in value from a Four Seasons meal,
 a trip to the Poconos differs in value from a trip to the Caribbean,
 a Bruce Springsteen concert differs in value from seeing Mozart's *Magic Flue* at
 the Metropolitan Opera.

These examples remind us that values differ among people –

what is valuable to one person may mean nothing to another:
 one person values an early Beatles album, which another values a first edition of
 T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*;
 one person wants a cabin in the woods, whereas another wants an in-town
 apartment;
 some people collect stamps, whereas others collect old wine glasses.

So the great way to sort out all these kinds of value and differences in valuation turns out
 to be money:

money is the medium of exchange through which all the kinds of value and levels
 of value are placed over a common denominator;
 money is the commonly recognized way of assigning value and accepting value.

Jesus recognized that possessions were the interfering attachment for that particular rich
 man:

his possessions were going to get between him and his longing for God,
 so Jesus challenged him to convert those possessions into the common
 denominator of money and then give the money to the poor.

As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart
 be also."

So money is an expression of value.

Second, money is an instrument of power.

As money accumulates, value accumulates,
 and as value accumulates power accumulates.

Those with much money have the potential to exercise much power.

The perennial debates about campaign financing and corporate lobbyists in this country
 are based on this reality:

because corporations have a great deal of money, the amount they can contribute
 to political campaigns has been limited for over a century;
 likewise the government regulates the activities of corporate lobbyists,
 lest the financial power of corporations overwhelm the influence of individual
 citizens.

We well know that extremely wealthy individuals have wielded tremendous power in society:

historically, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, Eli Lilly, and Joseph P. Kennedy,
and in our own day Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, the Saudi royal family, and so on.
Just the names associated with the financial catastrophes that brought on the Great Recession over the past year evoke the power of giant accumulations of money

and demonstrate how poor stewardship and good stewardship have the power to disrupt or build up millions of lives:

Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch (or as it was in the old days, Merrill Lynch Pierce Fenner and Smith!), AIG, the United States Treasury, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Bank of America, Citicorp, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and so on.

Our use of money as an instrument of power falls under biblical norms,
for faithful stewardship of power often involves faithful stewardship of money.

You know this from your decisions about causes to which you will contribute:
which organizations do you feel called to support, and which are more peripheral?
where do you want your influence to be felt?

You know this if you've ever served on a scholarship committee or foundation board:
which applicants have really demonstrated that they will use the funds to the fullest?

which organizations are having the biggest impact in the community?
Money as an instrument of power leads naturally to issues of justice,
and so it is that scripture has much to say about the use and abuse of money.

In today's Old Testament lesson the prophet Amos takes out after the affluent who ignore the poor:

"Because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain
you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall *not* live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall *not* drink their wine.

"For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins –
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate. . . .

"Hate evil and love good, and establish *justice* in the gate."

Jesus probably sensed that the rich man who came running was *not* a person of justice,
that he was *not* faithfully stewarding the power his money brought him,
that the fruit of his wealth was *not* mercy but oppression for the needy.

So money is an instrument of power.

Third, money is a tool for work.

The accumulated value and power that money holds can get work done:
it supports the time and talent of people to accomplish tasks.

You know this from the paycheck you receive for the work you do week and week out
and which you then deposit to use get other kinds of work done:
paying the rent or the mortgage for your lodging,
buying the food and clothes your family needs,

bringing into the house the books and music and TV you enjoy.
 If you run a business, you know how the cash flow affects how many employees you can support and when you can make those capital improvements.

If you manage a non-profit institution, you know how fees, tuition, grants and donations affect the work your institution does:

the programs you can or can't run,
 the clients you can or can't assist,
 the students or faculty that you can or can't support.

Money gets things done, and here is its opportunity as its value and power are put to work.

As Bill Gates became the richest man in the world, people were wondering,

"What is this post-babyboomer going to do with it all?

"Is he just going to hoard it up there in Seattle, or is going to turn it into a force for good, like Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller and Lilly did?

"Or are those days of gigantic philanthropy over for good?"

Well, around the time Bill turned 50 he turned his money right around to create the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,

which is now the largest foundation the world has ever known,
 and now Warren Buffett has committed his billions to it as well, so that when it's complete, it's expected to be something like an \$80 billion foundation dedicated to the concept: "All lives have equal value."

Jesus' well-known Parable of the Talents encapsulates the concept of money as a tool for work and the obligation to make it useful in the life of the world.

For all the earnest longing for God, Jesus doubtless sensed that the rich man who came running and kneeling was too captivated by his wealth to be able to use it for useful work in the world.

So money is a tool for work.

Let Jesus talk with you today.

Listen to his words to the rich man

and consider how his words related to you and your possessions,
 how his words relate to your faithfulness and your discipleship.

Think about your stewardship of money as

an expression of value,
 an instrument of power,
 and a tool for work.

In this stewardship season consider how all this relates to your participation in the life and mission of Grace Church.

And as you do so, know that God is not hovering over you about to wag a finger at you.

Instead, just as Jesus gazed at the rich man and *loved* him,

so Jesus is gazing at you and *loving* you.