

If I Were a Rich Man

Mark 10:17-31

If I were a rich man. . . . That sounds like a song! Tevye, a Russian peasant in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, wanted to be rich. He said, “I know it’s no crime to be poor, but it’s no great honor either!” Tevye longed for what wealth seemed to promise.

What did money mean to Tevye? It meant status in his community. It meant happiness for his wife and a sense of contentment for him. Money meant some relief from his backbreaking work and also time to think. Gradually, Tevye began to see that the promises wealth makes are often flimsy, temporary, and ultimately false. We might ask ourselves: what does money mean to me?

Being Christian means living life from the perspective of Jesus. So, what did money mean to Jesus? Today’s passage in Mark’s Gospel gives us some clues.

A man runs up to Jesus, breathless, and says “Good teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life? The *good teacher* line was a ruse to get Jesus to return his complement so that they could form an exclusive club of two. He seemed to be saying, effect, “I want a first class cabin on the train to heaven. I want to purchase stock in eternal life and want you to handle it personally, Jesus.”

Jesus counters with a question about keeping the commandments and the man assuredly claims to be a good Jew on that account. Then, Jesus looks hard at the man and tells him, “You’ve just about got it. There’s only one more thing to do”.

Actually, there were four things. Jesus told the man he had to: get up, sell all he had, give it to the poor, and come follow him. The man’s face clouded over. He took the news badly. It was too high a price to pay. Then, the gospel says something extraordinary: “Jesus loved him.” That doesn’t happen anywhere else in the gospels. Jesus loved this man who walked away.

What was it that Jesus was saying to him? *Get up!* He often said that to those he healed. “Get up and take a step.” Start something.

He told him, “sell everything.” In other words, leave everything! This was an invitation to leave the security of work, family, and home.

The last thing he told him was “follow”. He was invited the man to walk Jesus’ way, the *way of the cross*. It was the same invitation given to the disciples.

It was that third saying that was unique to this man: “give it to the poor”! This was a man of significant wealth. Jesus understood the context of wealth in first century Palestine.

When the Hebrews took possession of the Promised Land, they experienced a roughly equal distribution of the land and its wealth. This was during the tenure of Joshua’s leadership. The land was considered God’s gift. In the Law, there was a provision for conserving that gift. It was called the Jubilee.

The fiftieth year was the year of Jubilee -- every fiftieth year. In this year, all debts were canceled and all lands returned to their original owner. This would preserve the land as the sign of promise. Possessing a disproportionate amount of wealth, usually related to owning a disproportionate amount of land, represented a distortion in God’s promise. The wealthy gained land at the expense of those now poor. Even if this was not intended, a rich man’s wealth bore witness against him.

Jesus' command to give the money to the poor was an act of restitution. In an attempt to return to a *just* society, Jesus invited him to participate in Jubilee. The man couldn't do it. He had great wealth and it was just too much to let go. So, he walked away sadly.

How hard it is for the rich to enter into the kingdom of God! This is not talking about salvation. It is not primarily talking about getting into heaven after death. Jesus was teaching about the *way of the cross* – the Kingdom of God here and now. His disciples were amazed. They were perplexed and couldn't believe it. To them, everybody new just the opposite. Wealth was a sign of God's blessing. How hard it is for *anybody* to enter the kingdom of God – to walk the *way of the cross*. And the disciples were exceedingly astonished!

Jesus told what was almost a joke. "I'd say it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to get into God's kingdom (to walk the *way of the cross*)." Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration to make a point. Jesus was not referring to an act that was hard to do. This is not a reference to leading a camel through a narrow low gate into Jerusalem – an action that was extremely challenging yet was actually accomplished on occasion.

This statement was literal. In the Babylonian Talmud, there is a similar story of trying to move an elephant through the eye of a needle. It's the image of the biggest animal you can imagine trying to go through the most impossibly tiny space. It is impossible. But "with God, all things are possible"

We live in a society that values wealth. That puts us on par with just about every civilization in history with the exception of some aboriginal groups, tribes of Native Americans, and assorted individuals living alone on desert islands.

As Christians, we come from a long line of people with strongly mixed feelings concerning wealth. Many of them embraced poverty as with the example of St. Francis. The highest of virtues, he called it: "Sister Poverty". Some lived by the maxim, "the love of money is the root of all evil." On the other hand, proponents of feel-good, *success* theologies believe that God wants us to be financially successful. They see God as a capitalist and wealth as a sign of God's blessing. There's a lot of that today.

In Jesus' day, money was closely connected to power, status, and the belief that God loved the rich more than the poor. Wealth was considered the unique sign of God's blessing. What was Jesus' attitude toward money? He believed that you have to let go that iron grip.

Today, *if I were a rich man*, would it be impossible for me to get into the Kingdom of God? Would it be impossible for me to follow Jesus, to walk the *way of the cross*? Would I be better off selling everything and giving it to the poor like St. Francis did? Is that God's will? Would the world be better off or would there just be a new group of poor to take care of?

What would Jesus say? Would he say to let everything go? Would he say to liquidate all our assets? Yes. He would say to make everything available to the *way of the cross* – everything including money.

For most people in most situations, what really grabs us is not the money itself, but what the money represents. Money represents important things such as power, security, and a way to meet our needs and our desires. What is evil about money begins with the meaning we place on it and ends with the value we give to it. I know for me money represents a sense of accomplishment. It is a measure of my self-worth. For many, money validates our lives and our choices.

There are some important questions to consider with regard to our attitudes toward money. Should we, as individuals and as church, invest ourselves toward making the world

more just financially? If we answer “yes,” then what would a just world look like? How do you see yourself working toward that goal?

If I were rich man, I might follow Jesus like Bill and Melinda Gates, doing it in reality if not in name. In 2003, the Gates Foundation started what they called *Grand Challenges for Global Health*. They asked scientists from all continents, “What are the biggest problems that, if science attended to them, could most dramatically change the fate of several billion people trapped in the vicious cycle of infant mortality, low life expectancy, and disease?” (taken from *The World Is Flat* by Thomas Friedman). From the responses, they distilled fourteen “grand challenges”.

These are real life challenges such as developing vaccines that don’t need refrigeration, have needle-free delivery, and can be delivered safely in unsanitary settings by non-professionals. The other challenges are similarly exciting. Substantial grants were awarded to teams of excited scientists around the world. They began collaborating, using new technologies to share information and work together. They are now hard at work, inspired by the opportunity to make a difference. This is an example of letting go the iron grip on our possessions and making them available to God’s Spirit. This is walking the *way of the cross*.

We’re living in a new age in our world. So it seems to writer Thomas Friedman who usig that image in his groundbreaking book *The World Is Flat*. As followers of Jesus, we face the question: “how will we make our money, all our resources, available to our faith journey toward a more just world?” How will this be different in the new *flat* world of a level playing field? There are new and different opportunities to follow Jesus onto this field and to be church in the world. In this world, we can literally be in relationship with people all over the world. We can work together for peace and for justice.

Recently, the Nobel Prize for Peace was awarded to Muhammad Yunus of Pakistan. He has been called the *banker to the poor*. The bank he established in 1976 has been a key tool in the fight against poverty by issuing micro-credit. This is credit to those too poor to qualify for traditional loans. Yunus’ work has been inspirational to many. It has transformed lives. His credit plan also serves to build democracy and strengthen human rights.

Making micro credit available has helped translate visions into practical action to benefit millions of people. It has been an important instrument in the struggle against poverty. Most of his 6.5 million borrowers have been women. In addition, his banks give out almost 30,000 scholarship a year to poor students. The result of his work has been to empower a new generation of men and women and, in so doing, to break the cycle of dependence and poverty.

The words of Jesus echo in our ears today: *Get up, sell what you have, give it to the poor, and follow*. Jesus calls us to do what this Islamic banker from Pakistan has done – to make all of ourselves available to the task of following the *way of the cross*. The particulars of that call will be as individual as you and I. Jesus, in the presence of the Spirit, looks hard at us and calls us to do this very hard thing -- calls us through the needle’s eye – calls us to take all ourselves, including our money, loosen our grip, and let them go. We are called to use all we have to follow Jesus, create justice, create freedom, create peace, and bring the love of God into the world.

Gordon Cosby was the founding pastor of the influential Church of the Savior. One night, he was speaking to a church group about fund-raising.

People’s own attitude toward money is the greatest obstacle in raising it. Often, people who work with the poor treat money as the enemy.

They resent having to raise it. We are all stuck in the materialism of

our time. Very few people are free about money. We have to deal with our ambivalence about it (loosen our grip). [Let your response be holistic.] Include your money as well as your time. When you have money, you attract people looking for work, looking to make a career out of serving the poor. When you have no money, there's no mistaking who is called.

Jesus calls us to be free and whole in our commitment to follow the way of the cross and not turn and walk away sadly. We can do this! We can do it because Jesus loves us too.