

Second Sunday in Lent

13th March 2022

Luke 16:19-31

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Worshiping Wealth

Last month I spent a week in Indianapolis taking a course in nonprofit fundraising. It was part of a certification I started a couple years ago, and the courses have covered a whole range of information about financial health and management of nonprofits. As you know, the church is a nonprofit entity, so there's been lots of great information for the financial health of our church.

But the courses have not been church specific, and so I've appreciated being in conversation with people from all over the country who are involved in all kinds

of nonprofit endeavors... colleges and universities, small community ministries like some of the ones we support – ARM and Shepherd's Inn, museums that help promote civic engagement and education, and national nonprofits focused on social welfare like the Salvation Army and March of Dimes.

At the course last month, we were discussing planned giving. In a nutshell, planned giving is when people leave money to charity in their wills. We've been very fortunate here that several folks have made planned gifts to this church in their

wills over the years. Those gifts, large and small, continue to support the work we do today. If you haven't ever thought about that before, here's my plug to consider that.

But one section of the class was about all of these vehicles to help the very rich transfer wealth while minimizing taxes—donor advised funds, charitable trusts, and so on. As we were talking about these planned giving options, one of the women in the class spoke up. Her name was Ifeoma, and she's from Nigeria. She remarked how unusual the whole conversation was for her. "This seems like a uniquely American problem," she noted. "This whole idea of philanthropy is a thing we don't have in my country," she continued.

She went on to note how America was different from her native Nigeria and how

most other countries handle public welfare. Here was this whole section of a class devoted to trying to help all of us working for nonprofits to find ways to help convince and facilitate the ultra-wealthy to share some of their money to help support others or to give toward the common good. But in Nigeria, and in many other countries around the world, these kinds of public interests are not funded by wealthy benefactors, but by everyone, the whole citizenry, who pay taxes and whose taxes are used to fund healthcare, public housing, social safety nets, museums, and other similar things.

Her insight was something I'd never really considered or noticed before, but I think she was on to something in how we approach the common good differently here. We depend much more on charities to

do what the government does in other countries. And those charities are funded not from public funds, but from discretionary dollars.

Last week, I introduced our Lenten series of considering how Jesus' temptation in the desert mirrors the temptations the church continues to face living in empire. The first of those temptations was to turn stones to bread. In broader terms, it's a temptation to unlimited resources. Take something that's ostensibly worthless and turn it into something valuable—stones to bread. The temptation is to not only satisfy our own needs, but to imagine the good we could do with unlimited resources.

Even as I talk about these temptations, I'm reminded of just how enticing they are. As a church, we invest some of our own limited resources in trying to feed

others – ARM, Loaves and Fishes, Shepherd's Inn.

Imagine the good we could do in the community if we have unlimited resources.

We don't have unlimited resources, of course, but some around us do. And so a whole industry has developed around trying to get those with unlimited resources to redirect some of those resources to the public good. It's an expected extension of our national belief in trickle-down economics. Get more money to the rich, and they will take care of the rest of us—either by providing jobs or charity or investments that improve society.

But reality doesn't bear out those expectations. Paul Piff, professor of economics and public policy at UC Berkeley, has done extensive research on the behaviors of the wealthy and finds an inverse correlation between wealth and generosity.

Lower- and middle-class Americans give more as a percentage of income, and are broadly more generous, charitable, trusting, and helpful, than the wealthy are. Giving among the wealthy is far more dependent on the economic climate as well. Another study found that individuals with expensive cars were more likely to cut off other drivers and pedestrians. In laboratory experiments, wealthy participants were more likely to steal, cheat, lie, and endorse such behavior. Our cultural worship of the wealthy as a savior class is sorely misplaced.

As a nation, we have made a god out of wealth with unrestrained capitalism as our Bible. On my way to the church on Thursday I passed a church on G Street with a sign that read, “lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.”

I don't mean to point fingers at another church here, but that is not the gospel of Jesus. That's the gospel of American capitalism.

And that gospel is preached throughout our culture. Poverty is a sign of laziness and sinfulness. It's divine punishment for our moral failures. Wealth is the divine blessing bestowed upon us for hard work. The 18th century philosopher Adam Smith, considered the father of modern economics, wrote that “this disposition to admire, and to almost worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition [is]...the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.

Even Adam Smith, the man who laid the foundations of free market capitalism, understood that our

worship of wealth is morally corruptive. What's the problem with turning stones to bread? The problem, according to Jesus, is that we cannot worship both God and money, so when faced with the temptation to unlimited resources, Jesus rejected wealth.

In our parable this morning, Jesus tells of a very wealthy man and a very poor man. The rich man is separated from the poor man, Lazarus, by a gate. The man feasted luxuriously every day. He is depicted by Jesus as someone of such wealth that he is unrelatable to everyone else.

When I read this parable, I thought of a clip from the Ellen DeGeneres show a few years ago when Bill Gates appeared on it. Ellen put up a challenge to Bill—could he guess the cost of some common grocery store items like a box of rice, laundry

detergent pods, dental floss, and pizza rolls. If Bill could guess the prices within a dollar or two for three of the five products, every audience member would win a prize.

Bill's guesses revealed very quickly that he hadn't spent any time in a grocery store in years. He over- or underestimated the cost of common food items by 500%. Bill and Melinda's foundation has done a lot of good for a lot of people, and I'm not sharing this to demonize him, but to point out how out of touch with others wealth can make us.

And maybe that's part of the problem. Wealth doesn't just separate us from God—it separates us from one another, from community. The wealthier we become, the less we are willing to rely on others, on a community, for our needs. In the parable we heard this morning, it is not the rich man's wealth

that condemns him. It's that he allowed his pursuit of wealth to sever the bond of humanity he should have shared with Lazarus.

That's the real twist in this parable, by the way. In all of the parables Jesus tells, no one is ever given a name. We have stories about a Samaritan and a sower and a shepherd, but we don't have any parables about Bob or Sonia or Harold. Except for one. This one parable—we know the name of the poor man. It's Lazarus. Not only do we know it. So does the rich man. He knows Lazarus. And rather than help his brother, he uses his wealth to build a gate separating him from his brother.

At the end of the parable, the rich man pleads for Abraham to send someone and warn his brothers against the perils of pursuing wealth at the expense of community. Abraham

replies that they have Moses and the prophets. They have already been warned.

What warning did Moses and the prophets who followed give? Moses arose as the first of Israel's prophets at a time when the Israelites were forced into slavery by the pharaoh of Egypt. They were conscripted to make bricks that pharaoh used to build storehouses to hold his ever-increasing wealth.

When the Israelites finally escape from pharaoh, they find themselves starving in the desert. Like Lazarus, they plead for crumbs to eat. God sends manna, a bread that resembled fine crumbs, so that the Israelites had something to eat. But those crumbs come with the instruction not to amass more than was needed for the day, in order that all may have enough.

The rich man in the parable, like pharaoh, al-

lowed his pursuit of wealth to supplant the pursuit of community. The Israelites are instructed to live by different values, to care for one another so that all had enough.

The prophets repeated that message over and over. So did Jesus. When faced with the temptation to turn stones to bread, to use power to feed his own desires and the desires of others, he chose not to pursue wealth, but rather community—to be in solidarity with those who were hungry. Jesus seemed to understand that accumulating wealth would not solve the injustices of the world. Why do we still seem to think today's wealthy will do better than Jesus?

Amen.

