

October 11, 2015
Sermon - Pastor Annette
"Wealth Is Not a Blessing"
Mark 10:17-31

In Mark 10, Jesus and a young man have a conversation. The man was a good Jew who knew the law and kept it faithfully. And he was rich. He came and knelt asking Jesus for what his peers weren't: eternal life. Citizenship in the kingdom of God.

And Jesus tells him, "Yes."

"Yes, that is, as soon as you divest of your wealth and give it - the money - to the poor."

Jesus knew his heart, saw his sincerity, and loved him for it. The man heard him perfectly ... and went away sad to learn that the choice was such a hard one. We never learn what he chose.

The disciples were there too, but seem not to have heard the conversation - or at least made much of it - until Jesus said, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" It reads to me like he was playing them, since as soon as he saw their shock he said it again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." To which they responded, "Well then, what are we doing here?"

Mark does this a lot - place Jesus in a conversation with one person when he's really talking to his disciples (the twelve) and us (the church). Always, *always*, the talk - the lesson - is how to be kingdom citizens in a world with different values, a different mindset, different in every possible way.

See, they lived in a time and place steeped in the assumption that material prosperity was a sign of spiritual virtue. Greeks, Romans, Hebrews - they all assumed some version of that notion. Can you imagine a culture believing that? Or a religion teaching or preaching that?

No. And Yes. American culture prizes wealth - but equate it with spiritual virtue? I would say no. But church? Absolutely! At least with regard to Protestants in the West. Prosperity gospel has always sold well in these parts.

A gospel in which prosperity is not so much a sign of human spiritual virtue but of divine favor.

God helps those who do what? "*who help themselves,*" of course.

It's another place where being a Christian and being an American is so co-mingled it's impossible to distinguish from which citizenship we are thinking, believing, and living.

Which is to say: the disciples weren't making up their confusion and anxiety, any more than we are when passages like this surface in our worship. "This? Again? Really?"

Then and now, here and there, money was and is - without question - the hardest work Jesus has to do in his disciples, in the church. Now I am not going to unpack all that right now, but simply say that the overriding message of the gospel with regard to money is this: Wealth. Is. Not. A. Blessing.

Here and elsewhere, I understand Jesus to say that wealth can be a burden, or an obstacle or a hazard, maybe even a curse.

But NOT here in Mark 10, or anywhere in the gospel, do I see or hear Jesus suggest or reinforce the notion that wealth is a sign of God's favor upon ... *anyone*. Now, that said, neither do I see or hear Jesus preaching a consistent message of severe asceticism: radical self-denial or self-imposed poverty.

So if not exclusively bad nor exclusively good, what understanding and treatment of wealth is Jesus preaching and teaching?

A tool; a really, really, really SHARP tool. To be cared for and used - intentionally, carefully, when those who have it are praying, paying attention, and practicing right use.

Money: What are some things it's useful for? It's good for buying bread and cheese and socks and college tuition.... What are some things for which it's useless? It won't forgive a ruined heart, or heal a grieving spirit.... What if, in our hearts and minds, we truly believed money was just a tool? And that the more we have in our care, the more work we have to do?

Maybe that's why the young man was sad - because it was going to be such hard work to divest his portfolio. Know what is harder still? Divesting ourselves of the attitudes that have us so attached to money in the first place: emotionally and mentally and socially and spiritually attached to money.

This friends, I believe, is what Jesus is up against in his disciples and his church, and the work he will do in us, if we are willing. The work, if we will go along with him in it, of untwisting the deeply embedded connections in us between prosperity and security, between financial worth and self-worth, between work and divine favor.

One commentator wrote that most of us would rather talk to our therapist about our sex lives than to our accountant about our financial lives.

Now I really don't want to know if that's true for you, so please feel free not to share. However, I'm asking you right now to tap into how or what you think and feel about money. Your money. Other people's money. Money in general. About having to listen to me talk about money in church.

Maybe you feel anxious? Maybe you have bad history with preachers talking about money. Does anyone have GOOD history with preachers talking about money? Maybe you feel stressed about some money issue in particular. Just confused or uncomfortable. Maybe you like it better when we just don't bring it up.

Friends, here's the thing about Jesus. What does he want? I say this all the time: what does he want? He wants everything. Empty every pocket into his lap - that's his plan. And these pockets of anxiety and stress and confusion and denial. Guess what? He wants those too. He wants to break that lock money has on your peace and freedom and joy.

Because eternal life, the kingdom of God, it's not a place of stress and anxiety. You can't bring it in there. And you especially don't get to bring it in there and pretend you aren't!

And if we could get that truth planted down deep in us - THEN, maybe only then, does what Jesus said to the young man begin to make sense. Now, I don't know if Jesus called him to become poor. I'm positive he called him to become generous. To stop thinking about the poor in terms of pocket change.

And whatever else Jesus is saying to the church in this passage, I know he is inviting us to rethink our understanding and our practice of the word generous. Nah, not tweaking - how about a hard U-turn away from "how cheaply can I get away with giving?" to "how much can I do? how much can *we* do?"

But in other gospel stories, people do all kinds of crazy, extravagant, wasteful - some might even say *irresponsible* - things with money, and Jesus is so cool with it. Can you think of an example? Either in something that happens or a story he tells?

1. The woman who poured all that expensive perfume on him.
2. How about the workers in the field who worked two hours and got the same pay as the ones who'd worked ten. The exact opposite of minimum wage (an employer's way of saying, "I'd pay you less if it were legal").
3. The prodigal son; a dad gives half his worth to a selfish, wasteful, disrespectful son.
4. One close to my family lately: the wedding at Cana, where the wine ran out and Jesus gave them better than what the bride's father bought in the first place, as if to say, "Dude, don't be so cheap."

Over and over in the gospels are scenes and stories in which Jesus presses the point: *It's only money, . . . what matters is compassion, kindness, generosity, and joy.*

At Mariah's wedding a kid, about 18 months old, went home soaked - in watermelon juice, and chocolate icing, and macaroni and cheese . . . He was sticky and dirty and happy, and I thought, I hope everyone left that wedding feeling like he looked. It was so expensive - and I don't regret a dime of it.

Friends, if one's goal in life is to be a decent human being, to make an honest living and share with others, then that's fine. Such a person can work and save and spend and give as one chooses.

But if we want what Jesus offers, what Jesus came to give, what our presence here suggests we are at least interested in having - eternal life, citizenship in God's kingdom, which neither begins at birth nor ends in death - then how we think and feel about the money in our care, how we handle that money, must be inherently different than what it means and how it's handled by the people interested in common decency and an honest living.

I'm convinced the story is not nearly so much about one guy doing one act of obedience, as it is about the long work of discipleship in the lives of believers and in the life together of the church.

Lamb's Ears. You know I hate them. Six or seven years ago I had a big patch I wanted to dig up. My neighbor said she wanted them, so she helped. We dug them all up and she planted them in her yard. Six years later, I'm still digging up clumps of it to throw into the ravine. Every stem has a thready root two or three feet long. They pop up everywhere in my flowerbeds.

The same way an ancient, deeply embedded human attitude will have to be dug out again and again over a lifetime of faith.

It's how faith works, because faith is change and this is how change works: we do our best, we improve, we get tired, we get lazy, we fall back, we need help.

Equipoise – the new word I learned this week. An equilibrium sustained over time, like a teeter-totter with enough kid weight sitting still on each end to keep both ends the same distance from the ground. Eternal life is an equipoise of human responsibility and God's grace. "Human responsibility" meaning: to conduct ourselves in ways consistent with God's will – except, we are incapable of it. Like me, forgetting to close the closet door. And Scout, knowing she shouldn't chew my slippers . . . but then she just gets so lonely and convinced I'm gone forever. Human responsibility is both too weak and too heavy to hold half the teeter-totter up.

In the Children's Sermon, Pastor Annette told the children about some beautiful, but expensive, house slippers which she chooses not to purchase – because her Golden Retriever Scout always chews up her slippers when she forgets to close the closet door where the slippers are located and then is out of the house for a while.

So we are stuck to the ground – God in the air, us looking up like these disciples, asking, "Then what's the point??" And God saying, "The point is – of course it's impossible for you. But not

for me.” So that the equipoise is one in which God holds up God’s end AND helps us hold up ours, because we can’t, and because God loves us anyway.

Finally then, how? How do we change ancient, deeply embedded, culturally driven attitudes? We change our behaviors. We ACT differently; differently than we act now AND different from how we feel . . . and think. We DO things that do not comply with the deeply held notions about money.

For example:

1. Carry \$5 bills and give them away randomly – to homeless people, students, even the guy in the BMW behind you at Starbucks.
2. Become a crazy tipper – waitresses, nail salon people, the kid who shovels your snow. Tip 40%, 50%.
3. Save \$20 a week for two years and have a party that costs \$2000. Invite 100 people and have an outrageous amount of catered food so you can give the leftovers to Community Kitchen.
4. Give someone a job. That’s right. Out of your very own household budget – give somebody a job. One example – pay someone \$15 an hour to clean your house for 8 hours twice a month. \$256 a month. \$3000 a year. Why? Because it’s just money. It comes and it goes. It’s a tool, an instrument.

It can be a tool of compassion, of kindness, of joy, of faith in God’s providence. Not fretting over it testifies to the belief that God is our security, that what we truly need we shall have. And what we don’t have, we shall truly thrive without.

At the end of all things, friends, you know what I expect to discover? I expect to discover that those among us who learn and practice what Jesus meant here and those who don’t are all going to be amazed. Amazed to discover that there was so much more joy and freedom and peace available than any of us ever imagined. And that we’ll wish we had known earlier and better: Money was never a blessing after all.

Would you pray with me?