

“If I Were a Rich Man...”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 20, Proper 23, Lectionary 27

Text: Mark 10: 17–31

Preached: October 13, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Good Giver of every gift, open our hearts and minds to hear you, and to know that all we have is a gift, given to us to be shared. AMEN

Yesterday was a banner day for us: We finally got the roof replaced on our house, which means that we shouldn't have water pouring through our ceilings next time it rains. We're one step closer to being able to put the house on the market, once we repair the damage done by the leaks. Six guys appeared at 7:00 AM, which we realized when we heard footsteps over our heads while I was having my first coffee, and they were done by 6:00 PM. While they were working, I realized the plastic tubs that had been positioned to catch the drips could go back to the basement. As I carried them down, I started looking around me at all the stuff down there, and started thinking about what could be gotten rid of. There's one whole room of stored clothes and my yarn stash and craft supplies. A room with overflow storage for food crammed into a big deep freeze and a refrigerator, plus shelving units. An area with all the pots and pans, baking and serving dishes, and small, useless kitchen appliances I've accumulated over the years, most of which I've used only a few times. (Anybody need an electric hand-pie maker?) A section jammed with suitcases and Christmas decorations. A wall of cookbooks that I don't use anymore since Pinterest came along.

I walked upstairs, overwhelmed, and realized that the basement contained just a small portion of our stuff. The bedrooms each hold more clothes, furniture, objects. (I was kind of surprised to realize how many shirts and shoes I own.) One bedroom is filled with a floor loom and even more yarn and craft supplies. My study is piled with books. Walls in several rooms are lined with bookcases jammed with more books. (Tom periodically asks me why I keep them if I'm never going to read them again.) The kitchen and breakfast room cabinets are laden with more food, more pots and pans, the counters crowded with more small appliances. The living room and family room are filled with furniture, a piano, tchotchkes. Walls throughout the house are decorated with numerous pieces of art and memorabilia. Five TVs are stationed throughout the house. The shed out back holds riding and push lawnmowers and tools. And as we struggled to find a spot in the garage to store leftover shingles, I realized how much more stuff we had out there. Where did it all come from??

I had been wrestling already with the story of the rich man who went away grieving because he has many possessions. Gulp. That couldn't be me, could it, Jesus?? It's other people who are rich, not me! That couldn't be any of us here, could it? We're not *rich*. That's only the One Percent we've come to talk about with tut-tutting disdain, mixed with admiration, right? They're the rich ones, those *other* people, no? We're just middle or lower economic class, right? Jesus was talking to those other folks, surely, not to me. But then I looked around me, and saw how many possessions I have. And then I walked through the house, and saw all my stuff, and heard Jesus' words, and tried to imagine Jesus commanding me to part with those things and follow him. Gulp. Really, Jesus?

And then I went to a website called www.globalrichlist.com, which allows you to type in your income or the value of your possessions and savings, and it tells you your rank in wealth relative to everyone else on the planet. I encourage you to visit it. It's eye-opening. I was number 55,224,589th in the world for accumulated wealth. That sounds pretty far down the list, right? It places me in the top 1.23% of people on the planet. Not the One Percent! Then I typed in my income. As far as income goes, suddenly I'm the 6,998, 957th richest in the world. That's out of 7.7 billion people. I'm in the top .12% income earners in the world, even though I do not consider myself rich. I *am* the one percent, globally. Even if your household income is \$15,000, you're still solidly in the top 10% of the wealthy of this world...92% of the world's population still earns less income than you do. And young people, you're in here, too. The average American 14-year-old receives \$637 a year in allowance...that's more than the annual income of the half-billion poorest people in the world. Sisters and brothers, we *are* the wealthy man kneeling before Jesus. We are the camels looking at the eye of that needle.

Now, what is the point here? To make you feel guilty for having wealth? No. I don't think that's really the point of the story. Jesus doesn't despise this wealthy man who comes to him seeking answers. In fact, Mark tells us that Jesus looks at him and *loves* him. Jesus recognizes that he sincerely is trying to learn how to be closer to God, how to live in ways that are pleasing to God, ways that lead to life and wholeness. Mark says that the man comes to Jesus and falls to his knees in front of him. That's an important clue to understanding

this whole story. In the Gospel of Mark, every single time someone falls down before Jesus, it is because that person is seeking to be healed. This is a wealthy, religious man, whom everyone surely regards as having it all together. He's done everything right, from the standpoint of following the commandments, ever since he was a child. And he has significant wealth, which in that culture and time was seen as a sure sign of God's favorable response to you...it was your reward for clean living. But let's admit it: We still believe that. We look at the wealthy and we think they've somehow merited extra grace and blessing from God. And we look at the poor and think that somehow they're being punished by God, or else God would have given them more stuff, right?

But in this story, the wealthy man is not feeling blessed. He realizes that he's missing something, lacking something. He has a sense of *disease*. All his wealth, all his religious observance and moral rectitude, has not given him satisfaction and life. So he comes to Jesus to be healed of that sense of lack, of emptiness. I think many of us have experienced that same thing. We know that acquiring more and more things hasn't brought the completeness that we thought it would. We live with a sense of fear, a fear of scarcity, and it controls us. And we find our identity in what we have. And so Jesus, the great Healer, out of love for this man, gives him a prescription. First, Jesus tells him that finding abundant life is not all about following all the rules and commandments. It's not only about being a so-called "good person." That's only part of the equation, and frankly, none of us can win on that score. And then Jesus tells him what he's lacking, what the missing piece is: If he wants a full relationship with God, he must also change his relationship with his possessions, which have been defining him and are blocking him from finding true life. He needs to release the bondage that they hold over him. Then he must take that changed relationship with his resources and use it to change his relationship with his neighbors by seeking their good, and not just his own. And in that changed relationship to resources and to his neighbor, Jesus says that he will find what he's longing for.

The God who has given you all the resources that you know and enjoy—not just money and possessions, but also talents, and time—wants your relationship with what has been given to you to be life-giving, not life-destroying. Did you know that Jesus talks more about our relationship to money and possessions than he does on almost any other subject? Why does that matter so much to God? First off, it matters to God because how you spend your money and use all the other gifts you've been given has a huge impact on the wellbeing of your neighbor, and God consistently takes the part of those in need. And second, God cares about how you spend your money and use what you've been given because it has an enormous impact on your own spiritual wellbeing. Jesus calls us to see that the things we have are not ours because we've somehow merited God's favor more than others have. We are not self-made creatures. Everything we have has been provided to us as gift, and thus we cannot have a sense of entitlement. The blessings we have are given to us so that we can be a blessing to others, so that others might also live abundantly. In learning to see our gifts in a different light, by freely sharing them with others, we step out along that path that leads to abundant life, following Jesus.

When we acknowledge how wealthy we actually are, we are forced to acknowledge that we're surrounded by abundance, not by scarcity. We are so conditioned to worry about shortage, and lack! And in our fear and in our acquisitiveness, we have no idea how much abundance we even enjoy. Jesus calls us to live lives of gratitude for abundance, abundance so great that we can share with others without fearing that we will go lacking for anything. If you've ever had opportunity to share out of your abundance with those in need, you know that the blessing that you experience from that is often greater than the effect it has on those you are caring for. And somehow, in giving, there is enough, and it overflows.

The rich man in the story leaves sorrowing, though, because he's not willing to change those relationships. His "stuff," his identity, is more important to him than finding life. He can't part with it. Moving from an attitude of abundance rather than scarcity is a hard thing, and doesn't happen overnight. But I'd like to challenge you to do this this week: I want you to go home and look around you, and choose one thing that represents a way in which you have experienced abundance. It might be certain belongings, it might be your checkbook, it might be some talent you've been given. Give thanks to God for entrusting that to you. And then commit to giving from that abundance to someone else in one concrete way at a concrete time. Maybe you have money that could help support your neighbor in need. Maybe you have things that others could use that are just piled up in your home. Maybe you have a talent or can make time to do something for someone. The point is to give thanks for your abundance, and then to release that abundance for the good of someone else, putting someone else first. God can make that new relationship of giving possible for you. And in giving from our abundance, the good news is that we will find blessing and life both for our neighbors and for ourselves. Thanks be to God. AMEN