

## **Lent 1 - The Rich Man**

### **Mark 10:17 to 31**

Today's Gospel is about Jesus' encounter with a wealthy young man. He has done everything right: followed the rules, supported the church, and given alms to the poor. But, he wants one more thing: assurance of eternal life in God's company. Jesus honours his fidelity but tells him that he must do one more thing: sell everything he has and enter into solidarity with suffering and oppressed humanity. He goes away grief-stricken, unable to let go of his social and economic standing. He goes away disturbed by what he hears, and Jesus' disciples are left wondering how anyone can be saved if a person so clearly "blessed" won't be.

“What stands in the way of our relationship to God?” This question is just as valid today as it was in the first century! We are uncomfortable talking with others about money – particularly our money – and especially in church. Part of the reason is that we tend to compartmentalize our faith. We think about faith on Sundays but give it little thought the rest of the week. We think about faith when it comes to making sure our kids get to confirmation or saying our prayers at meal time but not so much when it comes to balancing our checkbook, deciding how to prioritize and spend our time, what job to take, or what political stances and candidates we support.

We've all bought into the idea of division of our private and public selves, with church and faith falling squarely in the "private" column and just about everything else in the "public" arena, public, not in the sense that "everybody knows about it," but rather in terms of things "shared in common." We all have to find work, pay the bills, participate in the democratic process, and so on. These things are "public" and open to

discussion. But we don't have to all believe and certainly not believe the same way, and so these things are "private" and something we've been taught should not be talked about in polite conversation.

Today's gospel calls this public/private dichotomy into question, asserting that our faith in God should influence *all* aspects of our life. God, in fact, does care about what we do with our money for at least two reasons. First, how we spend our money has a great impact on the welfare of our neighbour. Notice that Jesus doesn't just tell the man simply to give his wealth away, but rather tells him to give it to the poor. In Genesis, we learn that we were not made to be independent agents acting solely with our own interests in mind. We are created for relationship. So, it seems odd to limit God's divine assessment: "it is not good for the man to be alone" – to marriage, and not imagine that it speaks to all of our other relationships.

A common question that comes up during elections: "Are you better off than you were before this current government?" – suddenly seems glaringly at odds with the biblical mandate to care for each other. Shouldn't we be asking, "Is my neighbour better? Are we as a community and nation and world better? Jesus invites not just the rich man but all of us to imagine that we are, indeed, stewards of our wealth, charged to use all we have to best care for all the people God has given us as companions along the way.

Second, how we spend our money has a great impact on our own welfare as well. Consider the degree to which wealth can mask our dependence on God and each other by creating a sense, not just of independence, but actually of not needing each other. (Hence the expression "self-made" man or woman.) Jesus calls the rich man back

into relationship, and even solidarity, with his neighbour both for the sake of that neighbour and his own sake.

Jesus knows that there are few things more important for us to do than to share our abundance. From volunteering at a food bank to giving money to make sure fewer people go to bed hungry, to supporting the benevolence work of our synod, each time we share what we have with others we are blessed as much or even more than the recipient of our care. Jesus doesn't command the rich young ruler to give away what he has to cause him grief or to test him, but rather out of love.

The problem with wealth is that it isolates us from others. It buffers us against the suffering others experience and leads to false complacency about our own personal security. Wealth often leads to rugged, uncaring individualism, and to the self-made, atheistic philosophy of Ayn Rand and her political followers. Rand was a Russian-born American writer whose commercially successful novels promoting individualism and laissez-faire capitalism were influential and popular among generations of young people in the United States and probably Canada from the mid-20th century.

The wealthy are tempted to see their wealth as deserved, totally the result of their efforts. They affirm with pride how they “built” a company or gained wealth on their own, when their wealth is actually dependent on the sweat of workers, the ingenuity of inventors, the needs of consumers, and the support of the social infrastructure.

The young ruler comes to Jesus for a reason. He knows there's something wrong. He's kept all the commandments and yet he still experiences a certain *dis-*ease. Given that everyone else who kneels to

Jesus in Mark is making a request for healing, it may well be that he knows himself to be diseased and in need of restoration.

So it is with us. We know that more money does not make us happy, yet we act like it does. Our culture bombards us 24/7 with the seductive and false message; that money is the answer to our problems and there's not enough of it to go around. We have gotten into the habit of buying to make ourselves feel better. We've been so conditioned that when the new shoes or tablet or piece of jewellery doesn't give us that lasting lift, we start to look for something else to buy that will.

To counter these powerful influences, we first need to remind each other that we have enough, actually more than enough, and share stories of when giving to others brought a sense of satisfaction that money alone cannot – for example the life we give to the people being helped by Lutheran World Relief. Recent research shows that the *only* way money can make us happy is by giving it to others.

Secondly, we need to practice our faith in everyday life. What would it look like to trust God with our money. How would we spend our money this week if we trusted God? What would we buy? What would we refrain from buying? What would we save, and for what purpose? And what would we give - how much and to whom? Stewardship isn't just about giving money to the church; it's about taking care of all of our resources in light of God's commands and promises.

Thirdly, the rich man grieved because he could not part with his possessions. We also may struggle with an imagination dominated by a sense of scarcity and therefore have a hard time seeing the blessings of God all around us. While the move from a mentality of scarcity to one of

abundance doesn't happen overnight, we can start on that journey today by recalling one particular blessing we've experienced in the past week and giving thanks for it.

Some see the rich young ruler as a sympathetic anti-hero. He's young, wealthy, powerful, and spiritually earnest. He asks the right questions. But, Jesus shocks him with a challenge he couldn't have anticipated: divest yourself of all your wealth, distribute it to the poor, then follow me in my unsettled ways. That was too much, and so the story concludes: "he went away sad."

However, there are many wealthy people who have answered this call of Jesus. We owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude for their obedience and generosity. They did not flinch or blink.

Melania the Elder (d. 411), a spiritual heroine, is one of them. Born to an aristocratic family in Spain, at the age of twenty-two she was widowed, had lost two sons, and was one of the richest women in the Roman Empire. In her early thirties she hired a trustee for her remaining son, then sailed to Alexandria. There she sold her possessions, "changed her holdings into gold," and spent six months "making the rounds of the desert and seeking out the holy men."

In Jerusalem she built a monastery and befriended another wealthy aristocrat named Rufinus: "And so for twenty-seven years, with their own funds, they both entertained the bishops, the solitaries, and virgins who visited them ... So much wealth did she spend in holy zeal." Churches, monasteries and prisons were her beneficiaries, and, "no one failed to benefit by her good works."

Although it may be easy to take a cheap shot at the rich, Mark writes: "Jesus looked at him and loved him." – probably because he was straight and honest, with himself and with Jesus. He didn't try to have it both ways. There were no rationalizations about special circumstances, no pious excuses, no attempt to negotiate a compromise. He counted the cost, examined his life, and turned his back on Jesus. He was married to his money; divorce was impossible.

There's a simpler test that many of us may have failed – a beggar somewhere downtown asks for help and he is turned away. Did your heart shrivel a little? What went on in your mind? Were you really worried about \$5? One thing's for certain; whereas we might help the poor with a small handout, the poor definitely help us with an opportunity to imitate God's generosity.

Market values dominate our lives. Traditional economics ignore or oppose ethical values. Some people argue that unregulated markets are the best means to all public ends. Followers of Ayn Rand criticize self-sacrifice for the public good as the greatest sin, and commend radical individualism and selfishness as the greatest virtues. We are left with a moral vacancy of contemporary politics which calls for the re-connection of markets and morals.

To accept Jesus's challenge to the rich young ruler, to desacralize our money by divestment like Melania the Elder's, we face an uphill battle against powerful and prestigious cultural forces. We are challenged to swim against the tide, mainly by ourselves. If we can't imitate Melania, at least we can follow the rich young ruler and be honest about the struggle. Economic forces and prevailing political winds will always threaten to brainwash us. And like those large external and institutional

forces, the inner recesses of the human heart are complex.

Back in the fourth century John Cassian surveyed many monasteries. One thing that amazed him was how monks who had renounced great wealth could nevertheless fly into a rage over a lost pen or a borrowed book. Battling the spirit of the age is hard enough; conquering the depths of desire is harder still. And the invitation of Jesus is given to all of us, and not just to rich powerbrokers.

Oseola McCarty (1908–1999) of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was one of those rare individuals who subverted social expectations and disciplined her desires. After dropping out of school in the sixth grade, for the next 78 years she washed and ironed the dirty laundry of white people. She never left the home where she was raised, she never married, never had any children, and never drove. Her TV got one channel, but that didn't matter because she rarely watched it. Late in life she bought a window air-conditioner, but only used it when guests visited. She lived alone after her aunt died in 1967.

On July 26, 1995, when she was 87, McCarty gave \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi to endow scholarships for black students. Thirty years earlier, USM didn't even admit black students. "I would go to school and come home and iron. I'd put the money away and save it. When I got enough, I went to First Mississippi Bank and put it in. The teller told me it would be best to put it in a savings account. I didn't know. I just kept on saving."

After her aunt died in 1967, she made a plan to give away her life savings. She contacted an attorney, then went to her bank. An official laid out ten dimes on a table. He explained that she could indicate how

much she wanted to leave to various people by placing the appropriate number of dimes on each of the names written on scraps of paper. She gave three "dimes" to her cousin, one to her Friendship Baptist Church, and six to USM.

"I live where I want to live, and I live the way I want to live. I couldn't drive a car if I had one. I'm too old to go to college. So I planned to do this. I planned it myself," she told the New York Times.

Oseola McCarty reminds us of Melania the Elder. Both women followed in the footsteps of Peter, who after hearing Jesus's words to the rich young ruler said, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you."

Take some time each day at work or at home to name a blessing and give thanks in prayer. The God for whom nothing is impossible has showered each of us with blessings, and noticing and giving thanks for them can be a powerful way to live into God's abundance.

**Amen.**



## **PRAYERS FOR FEB. 18, 2024 LENT 1**

Beloved friends, in this season of repentance and healing, we accept God's invitation to be ever mindful of the needs of others, offering our prayers on behalf of God's community in the church and the world.

Dear God, we confess that we aren't taking good enough care of Your magnificent creation. Help us to do our part in preserving and renewing Your vital gifts of water, land, and atmosphere. Guide us to be more careful and respectful in our use of the marvellous earthly resources You have given us.

Dear God, we pray for all nations and people of Your creation. Move them to seek justice where there is inequity, peace where there is conflict, and wisdom for all those in leadership positions, including the leaders of families. We pray especially that You would guide and direct the leaders in the middle east, in Russia and in Ukraine.

Dear God, we pray for all who are suffering with inward problems of psyche and spirit. Provide caring communities for lonely people who are burdened by guilt, shame, addiction, and illness, especially those we pause to name now, in the silence of our hearts.

Dear God, we pray for this assembly. Keep all who worship in this place steadfast in your word, and keep us mindful of our mission to help those who do not know You to find a relationship with You. Fill with your Spirit all who are preparing for baptism or renewal of their relationship with You.

Dear God, we pray for Your guidance for our churches in this changing world. We pray especially for our BC Synod of churches; for our Bishops Susan Johnson and Kathy Martin; for our Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, and for our relatives in the Moravian church. Bless with Your Holy Spirit all pastors, priests, deacons, councils, musicians, and lay leaders. Bless especially Ascension Lutheran Church in Nelson, and Mount Zion Lutheran in New Westminster. Bless also the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino De Esperanza and their Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

Dear God, we give thanks for the faithful ones who have departed this life, whose transgressions are forgiven and who now rejoice in heaven. Lead us in their path.

Fill us, O God, with Your Holy Spirit, and with Jesus' strength to resist the seduction of foolish desires and the Tempter's vain delights which lead to misery and self-destruction. Forgive us where we have done wrong, and make all things work together for our good in the end, as You have promised.

Renew us this day, O God, that we may walk in the path of obedience toward You and righteousness toward one another, always rejoicing in your love and grace. In Jesus' name we pray.

**Amen**

Let us lift up the great prayer that Jesus taught us to pray:

**Our Father in heaven ...**