

17 February 2019

Luke 6:17-26

Text: Luke 6:24 But woe to you that are rich; for you have received your consolation.

Peterson translation. Luke 6:24 But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made.

What you have is all you'll ever get.

Money is the Root of all Evil: Please God, Make My Roots Deep!

Or Is There More?

Introduction: What a great passage from Luke. Not only does it say that those who have been harshly treated by fate are going to be blessed, but those who have been rewarded by fate have already received all that they are going to get and that they are in big trouble in the next life. Traditionally this passage has been used to examine the role of wealth in a Christians life. It has not been a popular subject. There are three areas of belief that Episcopalians don't like to consider in polite company: Wealth, how you got it and what you do with it; sin, particularly ones own, and one's personal beliefs, especially if the discussion looks like it could lead to evangelism.

But, no matter how hard we try, the role of money in our lives sneaks into our daily living and even into the occasional sermon – and not just in October as a prelude to the every-member canvass. Wealth is a relative concept. When I was a graduate student a fellow laborer in the academic vineyards was considered wealthy if he could buy a six pack at the end of the month. In later life I felt really good about taking my boat down the Mississippi river until I reached Pier 66 Marina in Fort Lauderdale and realized that my 37-foot twin diesel would make a good dingy for the boats docked there. Not only that but I was the only boat owner poor enough to be his own captain!

Even though we must acknowledge the relative nature of wealth, there are some things that the Bible and Christian tradition tell us about riches. In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he notes "These are the things I want you to teach and preach. If you have leaders who teach otherwise, who refuse the solid words of our Master Jesus and this godly instruction, tag them for what they are: ignorant windbags who infect the air with germs of envy, controversy, bad-mouthing, suspicious rumors. Eventually there's an epidemic of backstabbing, and truth is but a distant memory. They think religion is a way to make a fast buck. . . .Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble."

Paul is trying to get Timothy to learn two lessons: First, don't use your religion to make money, may the firm of "Christian trial lawyers" in Houston take note. Secondly, don't lust after money. Paul did not have a problem with people, even priests, getting paid for their work, although he earned his own money by tent-making. He was really warning Timothy about religious leaders who perverted religion in order to make a "fast buck." In our own time the "prosperity gospel" is a good example. Taking all of the "hard bits" out of Jesus's teachings is tempting to those who wish to make money from religion, but it is certainly not the "solid words of our Master Jesus."

The second lesson is that "lusting after money" brings trouble. Money becomes an end in itself. When you are in the midst of a lust, all sense of justice and proportion are lost. You have created your own god and are so busy making sacrifices to it that you fail to see the falseness of your object of

worship. In our own society we not only see such a lust, but it is frequently held up to young people as a good and desirable example of the single-minded drive to success.

Peterson translates the Luke passage about woe to the rich in a fashion that makes us take a much broader view. Jesus says: "But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get." In this translation Jesus seems to be taking us away from just considering money as the evil to seeing people who have a smug certainty about their success as evil. Jesus follows this verse with "And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your *self* will not satisfy you for long." This is the kind of *self* that creates a very small universe. Eventually having your ego-centric *self* as the central, and perhaps the only reality, in one's world produces an isolation so great that one self-destructs.

Jesus gives us an interesting and challenging notion: Money as a kind of surrogate self. One might call it plastic surgery for the soul. Fear death? Buy a mausoleum. Don't have a talent that brings you recognition? Buy power. Have a background of sin? Buy adulation. But the *self* can be maintained with artifice only so long. Eventually our true nature, whatever that may be, will out.

The Episcopal Church, starting from its Anglican roots, has never rejected wealth. Quite the contrary, the history of the Church is replete with examples of it pandering to wealth. But in more recent times we Episcopalians have moved closer to a New Testament based view of wealth. So we ask questions of wealth: How were your riches obtained? One would hope they were generated through talent, good fortune (a polite way of saying luck) with no exploitation of people and no ill effects on the environment, either physical or spiritual. The end use of money is also open to question. Who and how many benefitted from the wealth? Was the end result of the expenditure socially responsible and spiritually relevant? Money is not evil. It is simply a tool in the world. Individually as Christians and collectively, as a nation, we put the tool to either good or evil use.

The role of the Episcopal church is to remind us of the basic values we hold. Values that wealth should be used to implement. The role of politics is to decide what policies and programs are going to be made into law. We need to be careful that we keep the religious discussion centered on values. Otherwise we turn the church into an arm of party politics.

Paul puts a wonderful capstone on this whole discussion when he tells Timothy: "A devout life does bring wealth, but it's the rich simplicity of being yourself before God." Amen.