

22 September 2019

Counter-Cultural Wealth
Luke 12:13-21; Mark 12:41-44

Last week, in Matthew 6, we read where Jesus told his disciples not to stress about food or drink or clothing, because there is more to life than those things. We continue in that theme with Luke 12, verses 13-21:

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ ¹⁴But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ ¹⁵And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” ¹⁸Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” ²⁰But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

One of the most striking ways that the life and teachings of Jesus – as well as the practice of the early church – stand in contrast to our own culture has to do with their attitude toward wealth. As I mentioned last week, we Americans have three hundred years of being fixated on wealth. What is the “American Dream”? Not that we will be spiritually healthy and well-adjusted; it’s about making a lot of money. When we say that someone has a “good job” what do we mean? Not that they are emotionally fulfilled in their work. We mean that they make a lot of money. Our standard question when meeting someone new is what? “What do you do?” And then, once they tell us their profession, what do we do with that? We mentally rank them by income level. The sociologist Max Weber, in his classic book *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism* describes how our Puritan forefathers, by stages, came to view wealth as the blessing of God on the elect, and thus saw money as a sign of virtue and poverty as an indication of sinfulness. It’s in the American DNA, which is why the “Prosperity Gospel” – teaching that God wants us to be rich – developed in this society. As a culture, we approve of wealth.

But when we look at the New Testament’s attitude toward wealth, we find a very different picture. Let’s start with the passage you just heard, the parable of the “Rich Fool” from Luke. The message is clear. This man grew wealthy, and the best thing he could think of to do with his surplus was to build bigger barns in which to store his wealth safely. He chose unwisely. That night God spoke to him and said, “And tonight you die. Now what use are your barns to anyone? What a waste of a life!” but I could have chosen other scriptures for today, such as the story of the Rich Young Ruler, who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, expecting some moral standard to live up to. But Jesus said, “Just sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me. That’s all.” Then, after the rich man went away sadly, Jesus added, “How hard it is for a wealthy man to enter into the kingdom of God. It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to come to God.” Jesus says a lot about wealth, but none of it is positive. Nor is the early church very affirming of riches. In James chapter 2, James writes to the church, “What’s this I hear about some of you showing favoritism

to guests who wear expensive clothes and jewelry? What are you thinking? Rich people are the ones who oppress the poor, but God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith.” James almost sounds as if he doesn’t *want* rich people in church. Ah, you’re thinking, but a rich person’s offerings can make a big difference to a church. Well, let’s see how Jesus felt about rich people’s offerings.

We read from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 12, verses 41-44.

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

It might be hard to hear, but it isn’t hard to understand. Jesus’ attitude toward wealth is that it’s a barrier to spiritual growth. We’re better off giving it away and following him into homelessness. This *does* seem to be somewhat in tension with our American cultural presuppositions, wouldn’t you say?

Now most, if not all, the sermons that you’re likely to have heard on any of these passages were probably creative attempts to explain them away. Jesus *couldn’t* have meant what he said to the Rich Young Ruler. He probably only meant that you should increase your pledge this year. As for that bit about the camel going through the eye of the needle, that actually refers to a small gate in Jerusalem called “the eye of the needle” that a camel *could* get through if it got on its knees. Get it? It’s all right to be wealthy if you’re humble. It’s a lovely explanation that I’ve heard many times and that has zero basis in fact. There was no such gate.

An aside here. I find it fascinating how many self-described biblical literalists will fall all over themselves to explain away Jesus’ plain teachings on wealth. They will say that we *have* to accept the six-day creation account of Genesis 1 and Paul’s instructions about women shutting up in church as literal, historical, unchangeable truth, but ask them about “sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me” and suddenly they’re all about “figures of speech” and “rhetorical devices” that shouldn’t be taken literally. Me? I’m not a biblical literalist. I have no problem rejecting Genesis 1 as a work of science or history and rejecting Paul’s comments about women as “there goes Paul again,” but I’m not so comfortable tossing out Jesus’ words on wealth. They don’t look like figures of speech to me, and that scares me.

So what are we supposed to do? Well, let me tell you up front that I’m *not* going to sell everything I have and give it to the poor. For starters, everything I have is jointly owned by Rebecca, and that is *not* an argument I would win. But even if I did, I don’t want to do it either. We have retirement savings, and no, I’m not going to liquidate them and give them away. I believe there is a very real possibility that that is exactly what Jesus would rather I do, but I don’t have that much faith. So what do I do? What do any of us do?

Well, if I’m going to fall short of “sell it all and give it away” then I must foster generosity in every way that I *am* able to, because it’s not about money so much as what Jesus wants for me. Why do you think Jesus and his brother James were so down on rich people? Because there is a direct correlation between how much a person has and how tightly that person

clings to it. You might think that once you achieve “financial security” you can stop worrying about money, but actually the exact opposite happens. Nobody obsesses more about money than someone who has a lot of it. Jesus doesn’t want us to become the sort of shriveled souls who put their trust in possessions. He wants to expand our souls in generosity.

And by and large that doesn’t happen so much with wealthy people. Studies in church giving show that poor people consistently give a far greater percentage of their income than wealthy or middle class people do. The Widow’s Mite story remains true. A few years ago I took a youth mission trip to Minneapolis and while we were there a woman named Julia Dinsmore spoke to us. She was the real live poor person brought in for the middle class mission trip kids to gawk at. Ms. Dinsmore knew she was there as an exhibit, but she came anyway, because she wanted to tell us about “her people.” One thing she said I will never forget: “You talk about your ‘social safety net.’ That’s bull!” – she was trying very hard to tone down her language for the church kids – “You know what the real ‘social safety net’ is? Other poor people. We’re the ones who risk everything we have and give away our last dime and break in half our last piece of bread for our neighbors! So you come in here in your church bus and do your drive-by charity, and when you go back to your nice homes, we’ll still be here, holding each other up as best we can.” Yeah, it was hard to hear then, too. But I think that’s why Jesus hung out with the poor and the rejected. They have the sort of generosity that Jesus wants for all of us.

So anyway, if I’m going to understand what Ms. Dinsmore already knows, even a little bit, I’m going to have to practice generosity. I’m going to have to give all I can, and then give a little more. And no, I don’t just mean giving to the church. Sure, that’s one option, but this isn’t a pledge sermon. This is about trying to become the people Jesus wants us to become, and one part of that is becoming people who give. People who do not cling to their possessions, hoarding them in ever-bigger barns, but who regard them as blessings on loan from God, intended for a purpose. The goal is to reach the point where we consider our possessions things we hold in trust for God so that when we encounter a person in need we do not ask “Can I afford this?” and we definitely don’t ask “Does that person *deserve* my generosity?” (as if we could possibly know the answer to that question) but rather “God, is this what you want me to do with your money today?” If we reach the point where *that* is our first question, then even those of us who are too fearful to give everything away will stand out like a lighthouse in our money-darkened culture.

I want to close with a poem, written by Julia Dinsmore, the woman who spoke to the mission trip group that night. She had once been a part of a group organizing a housing co-op for a neighborhood, and they just needed an official sponsor for the project, so they applied to a local church. The council chairman of that church replied, “Those people don’t need housing. We give them a turkey every Christmas.” So she wrote this poem.

My name is not “Those People.”

I am a loving woman, a mother in pain, giving birth to the future, where my babies have the same chance to thrive as anyone.

My name is not “Problem and Case to Be Managed.”

I am a capable human being and citizen, not a client.

The social service system can never replace the compassion and concern of loving Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, Fathers,

*Cousins, Community – all the bonded people who need to be
but are not present to bring children forward to their potential.*

My name is not “Lazy, Dependent Welfare Mother.”

*If the unwaged work of parenting, homemaking and community building was factored into
the Gross National Product, my work would have untold value. And why is it that mothers
whose husbands support them to stay home and raise their children are glorified? And why
don't they get called lazy and dependent?*

My name is not “Ignorant, Dumb or Uneducated.”

I live with an income of \$621 with \$169 in food stamps.

*Rent is \$585. that leaves \$36 a month to live on. I am such a genius at surviving that I could
balance the state budget in an hour.*

Never mind that there is a lack of living-wage jobs.

*Never mind that it is impossible to be the sole emotional, social and economic support to a
family.*

*Never mind that parents are losing their children to the gangs, drugs, stealing, prostitution,
social workers, kidnapping, the streets, the predator.*

Forget about putting money into schools – just build more prisons.

My name is not “Lay Down and Die Quietly.”

*My love is powerful and my urge to keep my children alive will never stop. All children need
homes and people who love them. They need safety and the chance to be the people they were
born to be. The wind will stop before I let my children become a statistic.*

*Before you give in to the urge to blame me,
the blame that lets us go blind and unknowing into
the isolation that disconnects us, take another look.*

Don't go away.

For I am not the problem, but the solution.

And...My name is not “Those People.”