

#Blessed by Wealth or Blessed by God?
October 11, 2015 – Pentecost 20B
First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN
Text: Mark 10:17-31

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

I remember sitting in a US history class in my sophomore year in high school and learning about immigration to this country. We were studying the 19th century and how so many people left their homes and livelihoods in foreign lands to come to the United States and pursue that elusive American Dream. That promise that says if you work hard enough you will find success and riches – that you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps from poverty into wealth.

As we learned, some certainly found success in business and made fortunes, but they were the exceptions rather than the rule. Regardless, the myth of the American Dream endures to this day. The promise of this dream rings hollow, however, to those who work multiple jobs just to pay their rent and put food on the table. It's hard to dream of working your way towards riches when you are drowning in student loan debt or an underwater mortgage. To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., it's a cruel thing to say to a person 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' when they don't even own any boots.

Still, the American Dream has become such an integral part of our national ethos that we equate wealth with worth and riches with success. We hear on cable news how people who receive welfare checks are lazy. We hear politicians claim that those making minimum wage simply aren't trying hard enough. Meanwhile, we follow the lives of the rich and famous on reality TV shows and gossip sites and consider earning billions of dollars to be a valid qualification for the presidency of our country. For the first time in history, over half of the members of Congress are millionaires and the median net worth of United States Senators is now

\$2.7 million. Even that phrase, “net worth” indicates that money is what gives us value – that the richer we are, the more worthy we become. But it’s hard to deny that in our system, riches bring power and the ability to improve your life. With wealth, you can access the best healthcare, eat the healthiest foods, and join the finest gyms. Indeed, enough money can give you access to a long and healthy life.

So perhaps the rich man’s question to Jesus in today’s gospel makes sense in a way. Here is a man kneeling before Jesus probably dressed in the finest robes he can buy and attempting to flatter Jesus with an unusual honorific. “Good teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He almost makes it seem like a business transaction – like eternal life was as easy to obtain as some new gadget. It’s as if he were saying, “What can I, a wealthy and powerful person, do to gain God’s favor? How much does that cost, anyway – how much to get into the “in” club?” Jesus advises he keep the commandments – the Law of Moses, familiar to any faithful Jew. Interestingly though, Jesus only mentions commandments dealing with interpersonal relationships, rather than the divine-human relationship, and he adds one, “You shall not defraud.” How did this man get rich anyway? After the rich man insists that he has kept the law, which is a dubious assertion for any person, Jesus looks at him and loves him. He looks at him and sees him for who he is and says, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...then come, follow me.” The rich man leaves grieving and the disciples are shocked. Jesus compounds their confusion when he says, “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.” They ask Jesus, “Then who can be saved?”

See, at that time, those who were rich also enjoyed great power and privilege. Perhaps the disciples assumed it would be as easy for wealthy people to enter God’s kingdom as it was

for them to control every other aspect of life. Perhaps they saw riches as a result of God's grace and love – the more God loves you, the richer you will be.

We see this same type of thinking in our own culture today. I'm sure we have all heard someone we know say how blessed they are that they were able to buy a new house or a new car or something. I know I've seen many posts on my Facebook newsfeed where friends say they are #blessed on account of the new things they could afford. I see preachers in mega-churches preaching a so-called "prosperity gospel" in which God will bestow great riches on you if you are faithful and send enough money to the church. It's hard to deny that we as a society still see wealth as a status symbol and a means to obtain contentment. 'If I just had more money saved, I wouldn't have to worry as much.' Or, 'I'd be better-off if I had a nicer car.' We try to build up our own happiness and worth with material goods. Even though we live in one of the richest countries in the world, we desire more. And we see the joy of the kingdom of God as something that we can achieve on our own rather than something freely given by God.

And just as with the rich man in the gospel reading, Jesus looks at us, loves us, and says, 'you're still missing something. With all of your riches, you still lack something.' Rather than buying into our system of wealth making worth, Jesus rejects our structures and reverses our expectations. The kingdom of God is not something we can obtain if we try hard enough or pay enough – it's not another "thing" about which we can boast. The kingdom of God is about being in relationship with each other and caring for those in need. It's about those interpersonal relationships Jesus mentioned to the rich man. Jesus knew that by obsessing about attaining wealth, we place barriers between our siblings in Christ and ourselves. We ignore the cries of the hungry and poor – like the Prophet Amos mentioned in our first lesson – the very people with whom Jesus spent his time. We rely less on God's grace and more on our own abilities and

efforts. Indeed, if wealth becomes our goal in life, it's easy to for money to become our true god. As Martin Luther said, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends...that is really your God." He said, "There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that they care for no one else. They, too, have a god...money and property – on which they set their whole heart." It's easy for us to make gods of our possessions, but they inhibit true relationship with each other.

Just as he did with the rich man, Jesus calls us to recognize and reject the false gods we have created in our lives that prevent us from living in God's kingdom of relational community. By letting go of these barriers we may more freely follow Jesus in his ministry of love and service for all people. And like the rich man, this may leave us grieving, for we too have many possessions and put much stock in them. Like the disciples, we ask, "Then who can be saved?" And just like the disciples, Jesus looks at us, loves us, and says, 'you cannot save yourselves, no matter how hard you try. It is impossible for humans to save themselves, but with God, all things are possible.'

I do not know what happened to the rich man in today's gospel lesson. We are only told he left feeling sad. Perhaps he ended up selling his possessions and joining in Jesus' ministry. Perhaps he decided that his things were worth too much to him. I guess we'll never know for sure. But if we desire to live more fully into the God's kingdom on earth, we must learn to put our trust in God rather than our wealth and possessions. This is no easy task and may feel impossible, but with God, all things are possible.