

20 Pentecost

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 10:17-31

The text for the sermon is from the Gospel.

I used to think this was an easy passage to preach on. For me, it all turned on this phrase: “When he heard this, the rich young man was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

And then, for me, it also turned on this phrase, “For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

The way I used to preach on this passage it went like this: the man's mistake wasn't so much in not giving away everything he owned; rather his mistake was in leaving too soon. He left Jesus' presence before Jesus announced that with God all things are possible. Even rich people can get into heaven. Or as one of the pastors put it at sermon study Monday morning, punning on Donald Trump's name, “Well, Trump that!”

But more and more I'm not sure, I sit so easily with my former sense of how we should read this passage. I do believe that God and God alone determines our worth and not our fiercest efforts to define ourselves as worthy. Our worth is declared by God in the same way that our sins are forgiven by God. That's what that mouthful of Lutheran theology means: “Forensic justification by grace through faith.” We are declared forgiven, adopted, beloved by God not because of any good we've managed to do, but just because God loves us. That's our good news, first and last.

So what do we do with this Bible passage? Because while it's about salvation into a next life, it's also about economic interests. How many of you studied economics in high school or in college? I could never get interested. It really wasn't until I was in seminary where, studying Greek, I learned the root of the word, “economy.” It comes from two Greek words, “oikos” meaning house and “nomos” meaning law or rules. So “economy” means the “house rules.”

As people of faith, as the body of Christ in the world, we are called to figure out how our use of assets can best serve not our own needs, but the economy—the “house rules” of God's realm.

One of my American Baptist colleagues, Jerrod Huguenot, in our text study group shared a sermon he'd written on this passage. He wrote about the socio-economic reality of first-century Palestine. Just a brush-up on the setting: the Roman Empire was controlling the region. Wealth and power were in the hands of a very, very few. Mostly everyone in the Roman Empire was a part of the

peasantry, barely eking by at subsistence level. That would have included Jesus and his followers. They were not part of first-century Palestine's one-percenters.

But the rich young man? In my colleague's sermon he wrote of him, "This man of means has visions of the good life continuing in the life to come. He is not bothered in the least that he has spent this life taking advantage of others. He wants the free pass he has enjoyed since being born into the right family or being at the right time at the right place with the sweetheart deal that sets him up for life. He claims faith, yet he does not know the house rules of God."

Well, it's not really hard to figure out the house rule of God. They're all over the Bible. Jesus talks about them all the time. He says in Matthew, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven." Just a few verses later, he reminds us, "You cannot serve God and wealth."

In Luke he tells the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in which the Rich Man winds up in terrible and eternal torment, while Lazarus, a beggar the Rich Man ignored all his life, lies cradled eternally in the bosom of Father Abraham.

Again in Luke, Jesus says "Do not be afraid, little flock. Sell your possessions and give alms."

As for trying to save and save and save, Jesus tells another parable in Luke: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then 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. And I will say to myself, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry.'

But 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?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.

I mean, you simply can't ignore how much Jesus talks about the right use of resources. Jesus is pretty practical about this abundant life we are called to leave.

My colleague, Jerrod, writes, "The economy, the 'house rules' that matter most to Jesus are the ones ensuring the covenant is kept: no one is left out in the cold while others kick back and reap the benefits of kicking others....The house rules set up by the gospel look out for those who are told to stand at the back of the line. In fact, Jesus turns the order of things around so that persons of all means, great and small, are welcomed into the realm of God....the system that keeps the elite elitist and the peasant majority invisible, shall not stand. The early Church became a subversive alternative, proving a place where all folks from all levels of socio-economic status learned to live together as a counter-testimony to the way of the Empire. And indeed, those accustomed to being told they are the last will have the last word."

Jesus' words about the use of money speak to all of us. And by that, I don't just mean on a personal financial level. I mean that, as people of faith, we are called to advocate for the best application of the house rules to which Jesus calls

us, both in how we use our public resources for funding the public weal and how we use the charitable resources in which we have some say, such as how we use our assets in not-for-profit organizations of which we are a part—and of course, that includes the church.

The great Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggemann, wrote an essay several years ago called, “The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity.” Bruggemann’s words are a powerful call to consider the use of our resources. He reminds us that Jesus tells us again and again not to fear. “Don’t be anxious,” he says, quoting Jesus, “because everything you need will be given to you.”

“But you must decide,” Bruggemann goes on, “Christians have a long history of trying to squeeze Jesus out of the public life and reduce him to a private little savior. But to do that is to ignore what the Bible really says. Jesus talks a great deal about the kingdom of God—and what he means by that is a public life re-organized toward neighborliness.”

“A public life re-organized toward neighborliness.” That’s an invitation to Christians to re-examine how our money is spent inside—but more significantly for a common good, *outside* our churches.

Bruggemann goes on to accuse the church of keeping a secret from its people—the secret that Jesus was as much an economist for the common good in this life as he was the bringer of eternal promise for the next. In other words, how churches use their resources to help their communities really matter.

“Many people both inside and outside of the church haven’t a clue that Jesus is talking about the economy. We—church leaders, theologians—haven’t taught them that that he is. But we must begin to do so now, no matter how economically compromised we may feel. Our world absolutely requires this news. It has nothing to do with being Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives, socialists or capitalists. It is much more elemental: the creation is infused with the Creator’s generosity and **we can** find practices, procedures and institutions that allow that generosity to work.”

I think that’s an inspiring call, particularly as we seek to discern our future as church. What is the legacy that St. John’s will leave as the body of Christ? Whose lives will the resources of St. John’s abundance enrich? What possessions are we willing to part with in order to bear greater witness to the saving work of the God who has, out of God’s abundant grace, saved us?

Let us take seriously that we are, as Luther says in the Small Catechism, “called, gathered and equipped with gifts” for service. Let us be prayerful and discerning as we explore the right use of our wealth in support of the “house rules,” the sacred economy of God.

And the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.