

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23B
Amos 5:6-7,10-15
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

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Portland, Oregon
October 14, 2018

It's been observed that we are living through a new Gilded Age. In the late 1800's, wealth became concentrated in the hands of a few powerful businessmen known as the "robber barons," who operated monopolies that took advantage of everyone. It was a time of rapid economic growth, but workers and farmers didn't benefit and instead were exploited.

Today, not all circumstances are the same, but the rich are definitely still getting richer, while the poor and middle class are making next to no progress. During the last decade, as the economy recovered from the Great Recession, 42% of all income growth was captured by the wealthiest 1%. According to CBS News Moneywatch, America is headed toward a level of income inequality that has not been seen since 1928. (Aimee Picchi MoneyWatch 7/19/19 cbsnews.com *When it comes to inequality, these 5 states are the worst*)

When we hear this, it stirs up a bunch of stuff in us. Stuff like indignation, resentment and – let's be honest -- envy. As much as we may scorn the ultra-rich, most red-blooded Americans would love to have a piece of that privilege.

It's part of the complex relationship we have with money and wealth. Consumerism is what powers the American economy and culture. Getting and spending is not just how we meet basic needs. It's also how we gain happiness, status, and security. And we always want more. We Americans are so preoccupied with money we may not notice, but those from other nations are quick to point out how much stuff we own, how much garbage we throw out, and how the dollar drives our priorities. We may say we trust our souls to God, but day to day we place our trust in our bank accounts.

Moral judgments creep in, too. Having wealth is often seen as a sign of God's blessing. Think of all the "prosperity gospel" mega-churches that preach that God wants you to be rich. It's blatant materialism, but it sure does sell! On the other hand, not having money can be seen as a sign of God's displeasure or a person's moral failure, not pulling themselves up by the bootstraps. Billionaires are admired simply because they're rich, while poor people are judged.

The truth is, we Americans have a collective problem with wealth, not unlike the rich man in our scripture. And his wealth proves to be an obstacle to life with God.

This scripture would go down a lot easier if we could imagine the rich man as *one of them*, not one of us. A top-1% kind of guy with extra helicopters and yachts. Then we could discount what Jesus says. But scripture won't let us do that. We're meant to see this man as *one of us*. He is privileged, the way many Americans are privileged. At the same time, he is a sincere seeker, like us. He has lived out God's commandments faithfully but still hasn't found the peace he's looking for. So now he kneels before Jesus, humble, open, eager to do the right thing. He is *one of us*.

And Jesus, looking into his eager face, loves him. That's a powerful detail. In fact this rich man is the only person in the entire Gospel of Mark that's singled out as being loved by Jesus. Jesus sees into this man's soul and loves him enough to tell him a hard truth. Which is a gift, because not many people will tell the truth to someone who is rich. Jesus, looking at him, loves him and says,

"You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...; then come, follow me."

Notice there are two commands. First: "Go, sell, give..." and Second: "Come, follow me." But this man never got past the first command to let his baggage go.

The problem wasn't his possessions – it was his attachment to them. His wealth had come to define him. It had actually become his god.

Martin Luther diagnosed the problem 500 years ago in explaining the First Commandment: *You shall have no other gods before me*. Luther said,

A god is that which we look to for good and where we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in [it] with our whole heart... [Whatever] your heart clings to and entrusts itself to is, I say, really your God... [And money] is the most common idol on earth. A person who has money and property feels secure, happy, fearless, as if they were sitting in the middle of paradise. On the other hand, a person who has nothing, doubts and despairs as if they'd never heard of God. (Luther on the First Commandment, in *The Large Catechism*)

It turns out people don't change much over the centuries. The rich man looked like he had everything, but actually he lacked the most essential thing – the ability to trust in God alone. He wasn't willing to let go of his false security, so he sadly turned away... and Jesus let him go.

Please notice that Jesus didn't send him away. Jesus *wanted* this beloved person to receive the fullness of God's kingdom and participate as completely as possible in God's saving love. Jesus wants it for us, too. Jesus appealed to that man intently and lovingly – just the way Jesus appeals to us today. What will *our* response be?

It's a tough passage. No one can hear it without being disturbed. And that's the point. It's intended to keep on unsettling and provoking, in order to lead us deeper and deeper into the world-transforming reign of God. The agitation of these words is actually a loving gift from Christ.

As much as we'd like to keep our distance from that rich man, it's obvious how much we have in common with him. If it isn't money that has somehow become our god, then very likely there's something else that has slyly taken over first place in our life. Something else has become our security, in which we place our day-to-day trust. I wonder what has craftily crept in to become *your* god. Do you find your self-worth in succeeding, or pleasing, or acquiring... Are your priorities dictated by a career, a relationship, an appetite, an addiction...? Perhaps you've made a god of your ego, your competence, your plans. Or even given first place to resentment or anger or despair. Scripture calls for a reckoning. What do we cling to most tightly? What has slid into first place? And how might it be standing between us and complete trust in God?

We are called to a reckoning. Jesus is calling us release those false securities and preoccupations, to place our ultimate trust in God. Nobody is saved by their own competence or self-sufficiency. We are saved only by God's free and unearned love. Wealth doesn't save us. Poverty doesn't save us. Self-promotion doesn't save us. Generosity doesn't save us. Only God's grace saves us. And that gift is already ours through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is already ours.

Jesus said, *Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of heaven!* For someone who "has it all" it's as hard as squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle! *Ridiculous*, in other words. Can't be done. We can never save ourselves. "Then who *can* be saved??" the disciples cry.

And Jesus quotes an ancient Old Testament saying: "For God all things are possible." A simple statement of faith. It puts the trust where trust belongs, with God. We can't do this, but God can. And we trust God, all the way. "For God all things are possible."

For God it is even possible to shape self-centered human beings into a world-transforming community of faith. For God it is even possible to lead men and women away from self-absorbed egotism into restoring practices of compassion, generosity, justice, forgiveness, and self-giving love. *For God it is possible to make all things new.*

This scripture is finally not about who gets into heaven and who is shut out. Instead, it's about what's involved in following Jesus for the long haul and aligning our priorities to his. The rich man thought he could check off a box and take care of this eternal life thing. Jesus reveals it's not just one time, but many times, that we will permit God to reshuffle our lives.

In each season of life we will experience the reckoning, weeding out the false gods that slip into first place and asking what priorities God would have us live by instead. For Jesus cares deeply about our priorities, about our economic life, our political life, our relationships, our daily work, our actions... every part of how we invest our life energy, our time, our money, our influence. When Jesus called that rich man to give his possessions to the poor, Jesus was calling him to prioritize community, to connect with the human family, with sisters and brothers facing hardship. Wealth has a way of isolating and insulating people from what is real. Instead, Jesus wants us immersed in the real life of real people, all loved by God and all drawn together in God's worldwide human family.

God's love and God's challenge always go together – thanks be to God. When we kneel before Jesus, we receive first of all God's love that cherishes us and embraces us and holds us fast. Love that makes us right with God. Love that covers our sins. Love that makes us new.

And also, because Jesus loves us, we receive the invitation to give our lives away. To connect with humanity. To risk and trust and put our possessions and our aspirations in their proper place, under God's love, to share God's love with all this needful world.

"For with God all things are possible."

Amen.