

God and Wealth

Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz

Date: September 22, 2013

14:27

When I was in India this summer, I had an interesting conversation with one of the sisters with whom we work. Sr. Divia casually mentioned that she was going to be transferred soon to a new convent. Of course I asked where. She didn't know. I asked when. She didn't know. I said, "Well how are you supposed to prepare for your transfer if you don't know where or when you're going?" She explained that the Head of her Order would just call her soon and tell her where to go. Sr. Divia will then have one day, just one day, to hop on a train or bus and leave for her new convent for the next couple of years. She has no say in this decision and she doesn't know when that call will come; she just goes where she's told to go one day after hearing the news.

She did admit though that she'd love to get transferred up north because it actually snows in the mountains at that convent and she loves snow. Sr. Divia smiled as she asked, "Have you ever seen snow? Does it ever snow where you live?" I didn't want to talk about snow! I was still hung up on this transferring to a new home in one day idea and had to ask, "How can you get yourself organized to leave the convent in just one day?" To which she laughed again and said, "It's actually simple to move when you don't own many things, my dear." I loved her answer.

We seem to think in our country that possessing a whole lot of stuff makes us important, powerful, enviable, so lucky, God loves us, you name it. Take one look around Lexington and other towns around here, and you don't usually see too many small starter homes being built. Not when we hear all the time that bigger is often better. Yet there's a freedom Sr. Divia and the other sisters have in being comfortable and secure, and electing to not own many things. She chose a life and a vocation that allows her, well actually commands her, to pack up and move in just one day, to go serve God and the people somewhere else where she's needed. It's just so different than how we operate, so counter cultural for our standards. We may be saying to ourselves, who would actually want to live like a bunch of Indian nuns who have hardly any stuff to move when they get transferred to their next post, right?

Each trip I take, I often think that these nuns know a thing or two more than we do even in the midst of our presumably first-world wealth and sophistication. Truthfully, since they have elected to have less stuff to distract them, the sisters seem to have an easier time focusing on what's really important.

But let's take a moment to compare and contrast wealth in the world. The World Bank and Poke's Global Rich List and others do all sorts of research on wealth comparisons by country. It turns out, "If your family income is \$10,000 a year, you are wealthier than 84 percent of the world. If it's \$50,000 or more a year, you make more than 99 percent of the world."^[1] It's rather unbelievable right, if you make \$50,000 or more annually, you're wealthier than 99% of the whole entire world. Can we remember just how well off we really are when our Stewardship campaign begins in the next couple of weeks please? These statistics are important, and it should make us consider not only how the rest of the world may be living and viewing us, but also how we should see ourselves. Who is rich, who is poor? Who are we comparing ourselves to when we make these wealth evaluations?

Today we hear pretty starkly from Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, "You cannot serve God and wealth."^[2] And considering those statistics I just shared from the World Bank for the most part, most of us are considered pretty wealthy if we take into account not just our neighbors here in Lexington or even Massachusetts or America, but our brothers and sisters the world over. It's

not an easy verse or parable to understand, or perhaps we just desperately don't want to take this one literally or even too much to heart.

This idea, Jesus' words actually, force us to confront what really matters to us. His words cause us to ask ourselves how this applies to us knowing that we are quite well off compared to the rest of the world. God vs. wealth—"no slave can serve two masters" for we'll either love the one and hate the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. We cannot serve God and wealth.[3]

Let's take an extreme but not uncommon example. When you observe how people behave in the face of natural disasters, whether it's a flood or a forest fire or a tornado or an earthquake or a hurricane, you notice that most people are pretty quick to abandon their stuff to save themselves and their families. It's a no-brainer, right? Stuff you can replace, big house, small house it doesn't matter, but the lives of those you love? That's irreplaceable. And when people stubbornly refuse to evacuate when state governments and emergency crews tell them to leave, we may understand that desire and yet we may want to talk some sense into them.

When you watch interviews of victims of natural disasters it's easy to observe that when they do save stuff, it's often the nostalgic family mementos that might not be worth much money but they are priceless to that family. You observe that people saved a photo album or a small picture of their great grandpa or some old piece of jewelry or that box of letters Uncle Andrew sent home from the war. The point is that even when people may have a choice to make, a choice of what stuff to save in the face of the unthinkable; it's easy to observe people choosing those few nostalgic items as opposed to the most expensive objects in their home or even their home itself. This seems right on many levels, and I think this is what Jesus was talking about. If we prioritize our wealth over the more important things in our lives, this mentality takes us further and further from God and from one another.

A good movie example of God vs. wealth is Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. At the end of the movie, the crazy Nazi woman Elsa has the Holy Grail in her hand, and she crosses over the seal in the Temple where she was warned not to go, and the whole cave starts shaking and caving in basically. A crevice appears in the ground and all of a sudden she slips and is hanging precariously over the ledge, clinging to Indy's hand (played by Harrison Ford) as he tries to pull her back up and save her. With her other hand she reaches for the Holy Grail on a little ledge below her and of course they lose their grip and she falls into the chasm to her death.

As is typical in action/adventure type movies, the tables are immediately turned and Indy falls into the crevice and his father (played by Sean Connery) is holding onto his son's hand while this time Indy tries to grasp the Holy Grail on that ledge a little bit below him. The scene doesn't repeat itself though, because the father calls his son back to what actually matters. In fact, he calls him by his first name and not just Junior as he had the entire movie, he says, "Indiana, let it go." [4] This was the object of the father's scholarly pursuits and research for years and the cup of Christ was within his son's grasp, but choosing between even a priceless object like the Holy Grail and his son's own life is not a difficult choice. He chooses to hold fast to his son and asks him to take his other hand to lift him up out of the crevice.

In the end, all this talk about two masters and who we can really serve and Jesus flat out saying that you can't serve God and wealth is important. Maybe the choices we make will not be as stark as the one Indy and his Father faced or victims of natural disasters, and maybe we can't have the self-sacrificial lifestyle of those sisters I love in India. Though what can you and I do about this warning from Jesus especially in light of the fact that we're doing pretty well from a financial perspective in this great big world of ours?

To answer this question Presbyterian Pastor Helen Montgomery Debevoise uses this parable about the dishonest manager to call Christians to task. She says, "This manager, this person of questionable character, understood something that 'children of light' have had difficulty grasping: dishonest or not, this man understood how to use what was entrusted to him to serve a larger goal. Believers take note. How much more, then, must the children of God understand the riches entrusted to their care." [5]

The first step to taking Jesus' words to heart is understanding that we have riches entrusted to our care in the first place. When we consider the wealth in our country versus other parts of the world, it's almost embarrassing how well we live. More often than not, we don't seem to acknowledge this reality, we don't truly consider how other people in other countries get by. So let's start by acknowledging that we are the people Jesus is speaking to in this morning's parable, we are the ones Jesus is speaking to when he tells us that you can't serve God and wealth.

So what does it mean that these riches that we have, we admit it, are trusted to our care? Debevoise has an answer for that one too, relating, "We not only are entrusted with the vision of the kingdom of heaven; we are given the treasures of the King! Even in the present age, with the imperfect treasures of this world, we are stewards of God. However we use what we have before us, we should use these gifts in light of our eternal relationship with God." [6] Perspective, prioritizing, responsibility as God's stewards and caretakers of one another and this earth we call home, this is how we can serve God by using our wealth for good. And I pray that we will. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Elizabeth Hovde, "Income in perspective: America's poor are among the world's wealthy," in The Oregonian, August 4, 2012, http://www.oregonlive.com/hovde/index.ssf/2012/08/income_in_perspective_americas.html.

[2] Luke 16:13.

[3] Luke 16:13.

[4] Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

[5] Helen Montgomery Debevoise, Pastoral Perspective on Luke 16:1-13 in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, 94.

[6] Ibid, 96.