



God's Definition of Wealth

Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost || October 13, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Proper 23B || Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

Can any of you relate to the disciples in this morning's gospel? They may have been distracted with Jesus' first lessons about the difficulties of being rich. We are treated to a vivid picture of Jesus and the disciples continuing on their path to Jerusalem, at this point in Jesus' ministry, word of the miracles and healing has spread throughout the region and there is a growing group of followers who are curious and want to have what Jesus and the disciples have – peace, community, grace and the gifts from God that are continuing to guide their efforts.

What is described in this morning's gospel, probably happened multiple times a day, and postponed their progress. This morning's distraction includes a man who flatters Jesus by calling him Good - "good teacher" - a moniker that Jesus attributes only to God. Jesus knows this man's story, but reminds him about the commandments – You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.

Jesus likely knew this man's history, but when the man affirmed that he had kept these commandments since his childhood, we are treated to one of the most beautiful thoughts in scripture - "Jesus looked at him and loved him." Can you imagine that facial expression or the love that radiated from Jesus to this stranger?

Jesus isn't done with this gentleman; however, he then makes the extraordinary requirement that this man must go and sell all he owns, give the money to the poor and then he will be ready to follow Jesus. This man had MANY possessions – he was a rich man, so this must have come as pretty shocking and unwelcome news.

As we've talked about before, if Jesus repeats himself, we would do well to sit up and listen. It is a sure sign that we need to lean in and try to understand what Jesus is telling his listeners and us. His message is that it is terribly difficult for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

The disciples then wring their hands with worry that no one will be saved and go to their ultimate reward in Heaven. Jesus reassures them and us, that this is above our paygrade. God decides who goes to Heaven and who may require a more circuitous route.

Jesus is talking about tangible day to day Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven that has come near. He is saying that a person whose focus is on wealth and acquiring possessions is not able to focus on making sure that everyone has enough, or centering the commandments and living as Jesus lived – simply, and with a mindset of plenty, rather than a mindset of scarcity. Isn't it possible that Jesus is pointing out that a rich person may be more likely to focus on what they don't have and how they might acquire it rather than seeing the needs and wants of the whole community. Or be so consumed with acquiring or creating wealth that Kingdom values will be set aside?

The wealth that Jesus is promising is the wealth of love, community, Loud and obvious Kindness as a continuous backdrop or background music to life. Where everyone has an excellent sufficiency and no one is left wanting, impoverished, starving or unhoused. The Kingdom of Heaven allows for resources to be spread to where they are needed, where each of us is able to live into our full and whole potential. Where there is enough for everyone!

I have been thinking about how Jesus would look at wealth in the modern world and what he might have to say about the growing economic inequality. I imagine that he would look to those on the front lines of trying to provide systems, structures and policies that support self-sufficiency lovingly. I'll not put words into Jesus' mouth about the opposite of those efforts, but what would he think about opulence or consumerism that underpins some folks' sense of self?

On Thursday, we made a couple of pretty terrific changes at St. Andrew's. First, our Evangelism Committee evolved and renamed ourselves – the Make Kindness Loud Committee! I'm excited about the breadth of expectations and the opportunities that this rebranding offers to our community. Next we were blessed with more than a dozen volunteers who invested two precious evening hours to sort through the treasures and

donations that are awaiting our Christmas Fair 2024. This will be my first Christmas Fair as your priest, and I am prepared to be very impressed with our largest fundraising activity of the year. What touched me on Thursday was what drew our volunteers together. There was a shared sense of being helpful, of being among the many hands that made light work. I think that our captains – Sarah, Diane and Janet were really pleased with the turnout and investment of time and enthusiasm. I left Thursday night so grateful for this wealth of talent and people who are invested in our fair's success.

Part of Jesus' definition of kingdom wealth must be having the help you need to accomplish a large task, that you could not achieve on your own. On Friday, after LOTS of research, phone calls and e-mail correspondence, I found an organization that would give a large, beautiful and incredibly heavy cherry desk to its next owner. Sorting out how to move it from my house to its next owner required patience and money. The team that answered my call arrived on Friday and it quickly became clear that they needed more help. To shorten a long and lovely story, I will share that the two men who were finishing the winter insulation project overheard the movers and offered to help.

I was blown away and very grateful – and I had them each introduce themselves to each other with their name and where they grew up and they had to listen to my brief explanation – that they had truly joined together to make Kindness Loud. I hope that they will join us some Sunday, because they were so generous with their time, and they worked together to accomplish what I was afraid was going to be impossible. I felt so blessed by their kindness! This beautiful piece of furniture will have a second life, and not end up in a landfill. These four very different men are now acquaintances, and all felt right in the world – we crossed religious, cultural and even language divides on Friday, and were all briefly participating in God's Kingdom work.

Being rich in a kingdom sense is having help, being known and loved, being valued as a part of a community. St. Andrew's invites each of us to be Kingdom people. To learn from scripture that it is actually a deterrent to us to have too many things, or to idolize possessions and material wealth. Jesus expects us to invest in the poor and attend to the chronic societal ills – to untangle systemic inequities, and level the playing field. And in the process to find fewer distractions between us and God.

This week I also had a return e-mail from our sister parish – St. Andrew's Canton, North Carolina which was directly hit by hurricane Helene. Their rector Karen talked about how grateful she is for the extraordinary number of people who have reached out and are on the ground rebuilding bridges and delivering meals and repairing social service systems that

were washed away. She confirmed that Episcopal Relief and Development is already engaged in the clean up efforts, and she asked for our continued prayers for her parishioners as well as all those impacted by Hurricane Harvey. Even in the wake of hurricane devastation, Karen would describe her experience as being surrounded by God's Kingdom, made manifest by people's investment of time and money to make things better. This morning's Gospel story ends without telling us whether the rich and faithful man did as Jesus suggested. We never learn whether the man Jesus loved ever followed his advice – gave away all of his possessions to the poor and followed Jesus. What do you think he did?

I am grateful that we gather every Sunday in this sacred space to clear away the detritus of our weeks and center Jesus and each other as we continue to evolve in our understanding of God's love and we work to live into Jesus', sometime challenging expectations. As we prayed in this morning's collect, with God's grace may we continually be given to good works. Amen+