

## **Sunday February 14, 2016**

### **Mark 10:17-31**

There is a website called the Global Rich List<sup>1</sup>, where one can go and enter your net income and find out where you rank in the world as far as wealth. So, I entered in what I think is my fairly modest yearly income, and this is what I found out. That out of every 100 people in the world, there are 99 people that make less money than me. I am in that top 1%. In fact, I am, according to this website, the 49,382,317<sup>th</sup> richest person on earth. Now, that may not seem like very high in the rankings, but remember there are approximately 7.4 billion people in the world. I can't really wrap my head around numbers that high, which is probably why the website breaks it down into understandable numbers, like what that would look like in 100 people. This website also tells me that my monthly income would pay the monthly salaries of 214 doctors in Malawi.

So all of a sudden I'm feeling a little squirmier than usual when listening to today's story about the rich man who approaches Jesus to ask what he must do to

inherit eternal life. And Jesus says to him – you know the commandments – and he lists them off ... don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't bear false witness, don't steal, don't defraud, honour your father and mother. We heard these last fall when we spent time in the desert with Moses and the Israelites. And the man says, "yes, I have kept all these since my youth."

And then, some very powerful few words ... did you hear them? The next verse says "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said, you lack one thing ..." and then, the wallop .... "go, sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me." And the man was shocked, and went away grieving.

Yikes. Really?

And then the following verses are of Peter and the disciples, questioning, even arguing with Jesus to really try to understand his meaning.

How do you hear that passage?

Many commentators suggest that we need not get caught up in the literalism of Jesus' command. Is he really saying that we have to sell everything to follow him? Or is he pointing to something bigger, as he

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.globalrichlist.com/>

usually is, in his teaching. It's a fine line, because we shouldn't be tempted to water down the radical instructions that he is giving. But if we take him literally, it's kind of an easy way out. Most of us will fall short, and feel guilty. We too will be shocked, and walk away grieving. Then, we will probably move on. So how can we move past a quick response and uncover a deeper meaning?

One comment I read suggested that when we become obsessed with how good we are at following the rules, we are relying too much on our own actions, and not God's. Another pointed out that the rich man is only concerned about his own eternal life, not anyone else's. Others suggested that it's easy enough to focus on the negative commandments – don't do this, don't do that, but the positive ones are harder. It's not enough not to steal, but you have to take care of the poor. It's not enough not to murder someone, you have to make room for people that are different than you, even your enemies. Those are the unwritten, or follow up commandments that Jesus seemed to be so good at raising up. Jesus calls for radical transformation, not just ethical behavior.

Another line of discussion I read suggested that the man was asking the wrong question. The question should not be "how can I be saved". The law is supposed to orient you towards your neighbour, towards your community, not to ensure your own personal salvation.

The particular thread that I want to follow today, is one that Karoline Lewis raised in her commentary on this passage, and on Jesus' words "you lack one thing."

"It is so easy for us to view the concept of lack in only material things, material categories, as if lack is only determined by an absence of wealth. This is not to say that this text is not about money, about wealth, and what you do with it. There is a clear message that wealth does something to us and that something is usually not viewed as having a positive effect. Riches seem to steer our glance inward, to stoke our individuality, to set our sights on our own abundance with nary a thought about securing someone else's.

Beyond the fact that the rich man has too much, there's another part to the rich man's problem. He knows only to ask about safeguarding *his* eternal life without concern for that of others. "What must *I* do," he asks. He is unable to see that the potential to

experience eternal life might very well lie outside of his own doing. He is incapable of recognizing that abundance may very well be found outside of the wealth and riches he has stored up. He insists that what he has procured is irrelevant to who he is or who he thinks he wants to be.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the tasks of the Transition Team at St. John’s is to do some research into faith communities, both locally and farther afield, to get ideas about what other communities have done when they have been called to reinvent themselves for present times.

One story we came across was a church called Ogilvie United Methodist Church, located about 75 miles north of Minneapolis. According to the 2013 census, Ogilvie is a village of 361. The church is part of a two point charge, served well by a competent and well-liked pastor. The pastor reached out for help to the larger church in 2014, saying that the congregation was hopeless and exhausted, down to about 12 attending worship each week, and they hit a new low of \$35 in the chequing account. The consultant who wrote the article said that although usually optimistic, even she

was quite convinced that this church would close or be absorbed by a neighbouring congregation.

Instead, a miracle happened. Sixteen months later, they have somewhere between 30-40 in worship on Sunday mornings, and have all the money that they need. When a neighbouring church closed, they gained a volunteer youth leader and 10 kids. They have a clear mission and purpose. The pastor attributes the transformation to three things:

- The unshakeable faith of the few remaining members of the congregation and their ability to face the uncertainty of the church’s future without running from it. Although almost a crisis of faith, they moved from doubt and uncertainty to faith in God’s ability to turn things around and that God still had a plan for their presence in the community. Prayer was a big part of this piece.
- They had an unconquerable will, believing that closing was not an option, which resulted in the decision to keep being missional in their efforts, believing that God would bless their work.
- They had a teachable spirit, which meant that

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3699>

they were willing to listen to new ideas and to look at their methods of ministry and make adjustments, try something new, and step out of the box.

From the consultant's perspective, she believes that this little congregation's intention and commitment to continue being missional made a huge difference. They took their greatest gift, which was food, and instead of using that gift to create fundraisers to pay the light bill, they used that gift to create a free meal for the Ogilvie community. The community has many residents that are in financial crisis, and it filled a need. The congregation stopped using their gifts as a way to keep themselves going, and instead they gave it away to those in need.<sup>3</sup>

A theology of abundance says that whatever we offer up to God, no matter how small, will be blessed and used to transform lives. The rainbow fish only discovered true happiness when it began to give away its beautiful scales, and saw how happy all the other fish were when they received its gift.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.congregationalconsulting.org/what-I-no-longer-believe-about-congregations/>

This winter Transition Team is reading a book by Episcopal priest and church consultant Eric Law, called "Holy Currencies – 6 Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries", which we hope will provide a framework for renewal within our own community. Law's basic premise, after working with and observing many congregations, is that money is not the only currency at work in sustainable ministries. His conclusion is that there are at least five other currencies that flow through a sustainable missional ministry. These are: time and place, gracious leadership, relationship, truth and wellness. These currencies "flow" through the ministry, exchanging themselves for other currencies, forming what he calls the "Cycle of Blessings." The sequence of exchanges rejuvenates that which was spent initially, recirculating resources and regenerating more currencies, thereby growing and expanding the ministry.<sup>4</sup> During the next 6 weeks during Lent, I will be referring to each of the currencies and introducing some key concepts in Law's book.

It might sound a bit like jargon, and it certainly isn't a "blueprint" for success, whatever that is, but is a theory that might help us at St. John's to further

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<sup>4</sup> Law, Eric, Holy Currencies, Chalice Press, 2013

develop a theology of abundance during this time of visioning and re-imagining who we are.

And I say further develop because I believe that there are signs of a theology of abundance here at St. John's. Although there have certainly been times of doubt and what some might call a crisis of faith in our recent history, I have seen the unshakeable faith, the unconquerable will, and the teachable spirit that was described in the Minneapolis congregation here in this place.

I have seen this congregation respond with generosity in all of the six currencies that I named above. But now is not the time for us to step back. We are about to enter a new phase, one we haven't had experience with before. We will become a congregation that for now, anyway, has no building, but a fairly large sum of money in the bank.

Now is the time for spirited conversations and deep listening. How would we respond to Jesus' statement that "there is one thing that you lack ..."

Would Jesus want you to sell everything and give the money to the poor? Would Jesus want our faith community to sell everything and give the money to the poor? Well ... maybe. But probably not. But I do think

that Jesus challenges us to ask ourselves hard questions about how we are to live as his followers. To look deep into our souls for the one thing that we lack.

Karoline Lewis says that " ... the issue of lack takes on a particular meaning in this story -- it is that which prevents you from a full expression of faith. What is the one thing that is at the core of who you are, what keeps you from being the follower, the disciple, the believer, the witness God wants and needs you to be? This is a terribly hard question to answer, I know.

And so we ask it among the community of the faithful, hearing the truth from another so that perhaps we can then tell the truth to ourselves, with the sure hope that the places and spaces of lack might be filled once again."<sup>5</sup>

May it be so. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>5</sup> ibid