

In the name of the God who richly provides us with everything, Amen.

Jesus said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” One of my favorite seminary professors used to have a saying for times when Jesus spoke this way; “Now you’ve gone passed preachin’ and you’ve got to meddlin’.” And isn’t that exactly the way most of us feel when we get this lesson in the lectionary cycle?

This story appears in all three of the synoptic Gospels. Each Gospel writer describing the man involved in slightly different terms. In Matthew, he is young. In Mark he is rich and in Luke he is a “ruler.” Thus, when preachers talk about this, they usually refer to the story of the rich young ruler – sort of a short hand for a story that was obviously pretty important to the Gospel writers. Let’s take an honest look at an uncomfortable story and see what, if any new things might be there to discover.

The rich young ruler told Jesus that he had followed the Commandments all his life. What a great guy he was. Have you followed the Commandments all your life? Yeah, me either. But this guy *had* – he was pure of heart, honest and forthright and Jesus knew it. So Jesus, knowing all these things about the man challenged him by saying, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” And when the man heard what Jesus

said, “he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” Then Jesus went on to teach the Disciples about rich people having more trouble getting into heaven than camels have going through the eye of a needle.

In modern terms, “Dude! That’s harsh.” But there you are. Jesus has laid it out pretty plainly and pretty forcefully. What now?

Most of us have always taken great comfort when we hear this story, from the fact that we are not like the rich young ruler. We are not rich like he was, therefore this story could not possibly be aimed at us. This must be a story that is told so that “*rich*” people – people like Bill Gates, Michael Dell, Warren Buffet, people like that – could be corrected by Jesus for their obvious failings. And unfortunately, many Christian preachers have aided and abetted that approach to this story.

Well, no more. Not here. Not today. Today we begin to tell the truth and we begin to look at things as they are ... as Jesus saw them.

The story of the rich young ruler is a story that is aimed exactly at *US*, at you and me. Jesus gave us this story so that it would figuratively, if not literally, slap us right between the eyes.

We are rich! You and I are rich. If you don’t believe it, consider these things:

- Do you own a car? Only 8 percent of the people in the world have a car. If 6 ½ billion people in the world saw you riding in your car – no matter what make or model it is – they would think you are rich. Do you have 2 cars?

- Will you go out after church and eat lunch? Or maybe you'll go home and cook a nice lunch or early Sunday dinner. Some estimates say that 850 million people on earth are chronically malnourished. 200 million of those are children under 5 years of age. I am overweight. Am I rich by comparison?
- Do you have running water in your house? How about one – or more than one – toilet in your house? A child dies every 8 second somewhere in the world for lack of adequate access to clean drinking water. Over 2½ Billion people do not have adequate sanitation. ***We are rich!***
- How much money do you have on you right now? How much is in your purse or your pocket? How much change is in the ashtray of your car? How much is in that jar or tray on your dresser? 56% of the world's population – over 3.9 ***BILLION*** people live on less than \$2/day. ***Who in this room isn't rich?***

As the contemporary Christian commentator and writer, Rob Bell says,

Maybe you have this sense, you look around and you have this sense that you don't have that much, because you see people (who) have even more. But it's a dangerous thing when we start to think that '**our**' world is '**the**' world.

We in America – we in Texas – we at St. John's – are rich, just as surely as the rich young ruler was rich. And we do the same thing he did. We come to Jesus, either in this church or in our own private prayer lives, and we ask his question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" We ***all*** ask Jesus the same questions. What do we need to do with our lives? What is it that God wants of us? We work more and more and we are less and

less satisfied. What are we called to do, in order to live the lives that Jesus calls all disciples to? I would submit that Jesus would answer us in exactly the same way He answered in the Gospels, simply this; ... follow the Commandments.

Jesus told the rich young ruler not to murder, commit adultery, steal, lie or defraud. Those are pretty straightforward. But the Commandments don't say anything about giving away all your stuff. Or do they. The first two Commandments are:

- "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me. And,
- You shall not make for yourself any idol."

Jesus knew that those first two Commandments were what was holding the man back. "I AM the only God," and "don't create other gods." These are stumbling blocks for most of us who are rich. The more money we have, the more money we want. The more money we make, the more time and effort we put into making money. It is as natural for Americans as breathing. We measure each other by wealth. And we measure ourselves the same way. Money is our god and we have even created our own theology to support our beliefs.

Pop quiz: How many of you think that "God helps those who help themselves," comes from the Bible? You don't have to raise your hand, it's OK. *Many* American Christians believe that this statement from Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac,

(quoting Algernon Sydney) actually comes from Scripture. The Bible actually – consistently teaches the exact opposite; God helps those who cannot help themselves.

God calls us all to live as Jesus did, with generosity in recognition that everything we have and everything we are is a gift from God. Here’s the real, consistent message of Scripture about how we’re supposed to be with our possession – with our money, (as set out in the 6th chapter of the 1st letter to Timothy).

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life¹.

The rich young ruler was blessed by God, just as we are. God gave the man all that he had and all that he held. You may say to yourself – as do most Americans – that you *earned* what you have, by the sweat of your brow, the strength in your arms and the cunning of your brain. But the children of Israel said the same thing to God when God demanded that they give away part of what they had. God said,

You shall generously give ... (and) not be grieved when you give ... because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. For the poor will never cease *to be* in the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land....’²

And in the book of Deuteronomy, the children grumbled. But God went on to say, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God

¹ 1 Tim 6:17-19 (NRSV)

² Deut 15:10-11 (NRSV)

redeemed you.³” The children of Israel didn’t *earn* their freedom, God gave it to them out of God’s grace. We didn’t *earn* our births; or the lives we’ve led thus far; or those breaths that we all just took. Just like everything else in our world, they were all gifts from a loving, gracious and generous God.

In closing, think about this: in all of the Gospels, in all of the times that Jesus called people to become disciples – remember Peter and Andrew dropping their nets; James and John leaving their father Zebedee to handle the fishing business alone; and Matthew walking away from the tax booth – in all those times, the story of the rich young ruler – was the *ONLY* time that someone turned Jesus down. And he walked away because of money.

Over the next few weeks you are going to hear more about stewardship – about *pledging to give* money to the church. As you hear about this issue remember this: it is *never* about giving so that the church can make its budget. It is about freely giving back to God from what God has given you, for your own spiritual well being. Be a cheerful, generous giver – get the god of money out from between you and the real God, the God who gave it ALL to you and made you rich. I pray that each one of you might prayerfully consider how rich you are and what a good and perfect gift back to God might look like.

Amen.

³ Deut 15: 15 (NRSV)