

Satisfied Mind

I can't read this morning's gospel without hearing in my mind a country song that was written in 1955 by Red Hayes. It was first a hit for Porter Wagoner and since then has been covered by artists as diverse as Pete Seeger and Pearl Jam. Maybe you know it:

How many times have you heard someone say,
"If I had his money, I could do things my way."
But little they know that it's so hard to find
One rich man in ten with a satisfied mind.

Once I was winning in fortune and fame;
Everything that I dreamed of to get a start in life's game.
But suddenly it happened, I lost every dime,
But I'm richer by far with a satisfied mind.

Money can't buy back your youth when you're old
Or a friend when you're lonesome or a love that's grown cold;
The wealthiest person is a pauper at times
Compared to the man with a satisfied mind.

When life is over, my time has run out,
My friends and my loved ones I'll leave, there's no doubt.
But one thing for certain, when it comes my time,
I'll leave this old world with a satisfied mind.

This concept of the poor rich man and the rich poor man is certainly familiar to us from the gospels. Indeed, as we've discussed before, the Bible has a very strong bias towards the poor. Both the psalm and the Old Testament reading from this morning's lectionary show the poor in a special relationship to God. I chose to use Stephen Mitchell's adaptation of Psalm 90 as our Call to Worship this morning, but it doesn't show this connection with the poor and downtrodden very well. Listen to part of verses 13 – 17 from the New Revised Standard Version:

¹³Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

¹⁴Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

¹⁵Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil...

¹⁷Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!

This is clearly the cry of a people who have known great suffering and who are desperate for, if not easy living, at least a life that seems a little fairer.

The reading from the Old Testament for this morning is from the fifth chapter of the writings of the prophet Amos. You may remember I quoted from this passage in reference to James and his commitment to the poor: "(The strong) turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins — you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the

gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.” Amos spoke these words in a time of prosperity in Israel. Weakness in both Assyria and Egypt had allowed Israel to profit from the trade routes normally controlled by her larger neighbors. A rich merchant class had developed, who interpreted their wealth as a sign of God’s favor. After all, Proverbs 10:22 said, “The blessing of the Lord makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it,” and Ecclesiastes 5:19, “Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, this is the gift of God.” But those in Israel’s traditional trades, the farmers and the laborers, saw none of the “trickle-down” wealth they might have expected from the more fortunate merchants. John Shearman, a Canadian scholar, notes about this passage, “(Amos’) pleas that the Israelites return to their traditional life based on faith and justice went unheard. Has he yet been heard by any nation or empire blessed with great wealth and power?”

Both the Psalm and the scripture would have been well known to Jesus and to his disciples who, if they’d ever had anything much in life had, as Peter said, given it all up to follow Jesus. Jesus spent a lot of his time talking about the poor and the rich as well. One estimate is that “almost 40% of everything Jesus has to say recorded in the Synoptics is about money or utilizes economic metaphors.” So when this rich man (and, incidentally, he’s just a rich man in Mark – It’s Matthew who says he’s young and Luke who calls him a ruler – we conflate the three in our minds to come up with “the Story of the Rich Young Ruler” as this tale is usually called)... when this rich man shows up on the road to Jerusalem, it seems like he’s an easy choice for a bad guy.

Or is he? Is this fellow just another one of those powerful people trying to set a trap for Jesus or is there something else going on here? The many commentaries I read this week are pretty divided on the question. He comes to Jesus on the road and kneels at Jesus’ feet – a pretty astounding display of humility. You may remember that Jews normally didn’t kneel even in prayer; they stood. He addresses Jesus as “good teacher;” not a normal form of address to a rabbi and an adjective, Jesus reminds him, which should be reserved for God. Is he setting Jesus up or is he truly desperate for enlightenment? What was his tone of voice when he asked his question, I wonder? “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Inherit is a funny kind of word. Does he use it because, since he is rich and therefore powerful, he expects to walk into the Kingdom of God automatically, because it is his due? Or has he grasped part of Jesus’ teaching, that God is our loving parent who gives us all good gifts out of grace rather than our deserving? When Jesus reminds him of the necessity of following the commandments, his response might have been self-satisfied: “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” But Sherman Johnson wrote in his commentary on Mark that a better translation of this phrase would be “as to all these things I have been careful since my youth,” which another commentator calls a modest and proper response.

As I was thinking about the problem of how to understand this man this week, it occurred to me that the key might be Jesus’ response to him. Mark writes that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus saw that he was sincere and his heart went out to him. But, then again, Jesus’ love was for all the world. Maybe Jesus saw through his arrogance and loved him in spite of himself. I’m afraid we will all have to make up our own minds on this point. Perhaps we will ultimately do so based on how much we identify with this rich man. Are we willing to give up everything

we have to follow Jesus, as Peter and his fellows did? Or does this passage make us squirm, because we have many possessions?

In dealing with this passage, we not only have to decide how we respond to the rich man but also how closely our response matches up with the response of Jesus' disciples. Like the merchants in Amos' time, they clearly equated riches with God's blessing. If the rich weren't getting into the Kingdom of God without trouble, who on earth was getting in? Even today, it's easy for us to automatically equate a level of financial comfort with the love of God. And look, Jesus promises that those who follow him will be rewarded in this life a hundredfold with what they give up, families, houses, fields. Does he mean that if we are good enough Christians that we will be rich? Maybe not. After all, he does say that with the good things we receive we should also expect persecutions. And perhaps what Jesus has in mind is what Luke records in Acts as the experience of the early Church and what many other voluntarily poor Christians have experienced. The early church, you will remember, pooled their possessions and held everything in common, so everyone truly did have as many homes as their were homeowners in their growing congregation. The second century theologian, Tertullian of Carthage, records that still in his day the non-Christians were amazed by the way that the Christians cared for each other as family. "See how they love each other," he records them saying. As Red Hayes remarked in his song, money can't buy you a friend when you're lonesome nor, as John and Paul sang about ten years later, can money buy you love. That great Catholic advocate for the poor, Dorothy Day, recalled in her book, *On Pilgrimage*, how she would often get off a Greyhound bus in a new city, where she had gone with her work, not knowing exactly where she would stay, but finding Christian community that provided her with houses, brothers and sisters, often in the face of opposition or arrest.

So, what about us? Are we rich, financially? I'll bet if I went around the room and asked each person that question, we would all demur. No, we're not rich, we'd say. We're comfortable, we're doing OK, but we're not rich. Of course, in the eyes of most of the world, we and almost all Americans are dreadfully rich. All of us in this room have safe, warm, dry homes. All of us have electricity and running water – as much as we need whenever we need it. None of us are hungry on a regular basis. We have stuff – televisions, computers, cars. We have many possessions. The dominant culture tells us that this is what makes us and America strong. But what if it's really our weakness? Jeff Krantz and Michael Hardin repeat an old story on their website, "Preaching Peace." "The devil was on the prowl one day out to get the Christian. When he saw the Christian he shot one of his fiery darts and it struck the Christian in the chest. The Christian had on the breastplate of righteousness so he wasn't harmed. The devil shot at the Christian's head but that was protected by the helmet of salvation. The devil figured everyone has an Achilles' heel, so he shot at the Christian's feet that were shod with the gospel of peace so no harm was done. The Christian smirked and turned around to walk away. The devil fired an arrow into the Christian's wallet and killed him."

This may all still seem like an exaggeration. After all, no one in this room is a miser; none of us feel like our lives are ruled by money. But the influence of money and possessions in our lives can be subtle. For one thing, our seemingly abundant resources as Americans can lead us to believe that whatever needs to be done, we can do. There is an aura of self-sufficiency that comes from always having enough. But if we are self-sufficient, what need do we have of grace,

what need do we have of God? If we can earn and purchase all we need, can we still truly see how all that is good in life comes as a gift from God?

In a 1989 book, God the Economist, Vanderbilt theology professor M. Douglas Meeks offered a hypothesis I think most folks would agree with: that America is guided by the logic of the marketplace. Value is determined by the exchange of the market; everything in life is seen as a commodity to be used up, banked or discarded. The problem is that this commoditization extends to people as well. In the view of the marketplace, people have worth only in what they produce or know or own. Those who have little, produce little, know little are seen as worthless and expendable. Our society is not based on the communal sharing and familial love of the early Christians, but on competition for resources. Our fellows, like our stuff, are to be used or thrown away. We even see ourselves in this light. Our self-worth becomes rooted in what we do or what we've done and how much we have. To take time for kindness to others or to ourselves threatens our competitiveness in the market. Getting and keeping become our motivations rather than loving and being.

The phrase, "if only," is one sign of the insidious nature of this driving cultural force. I know I've used it. "If only we had just \$10,000 more a year, we'd really be comfortable." "If only I had just a little more money for books, wouldn't that be great." "If only I had a newer car." "If only..." "If only..." Those "if onlies" stop me from really enjoying what I have already, from seeing life as grace rather than as contest. The truth of the matter is, I have plenty, maybe even too much, but as my fellow Baptist preacher, Stacey Elizabeth Simpson has written: "the problem of having too much stuff (is that) it keeps us from realizing our need for God because we use it as a buffer against vulnerability. We use it to fill the emptiness in our souls. We use it to feel less susceptible to the vagaries of life. It keeps us from seeing how needy we are."

To escape the trap of using our possessions as our pacifiers, the trap of only seeing value in marketplace terms, we must consider what God values. I don't think we can reflect too often on the fact that our Scriptures tell of a God who chooses the unlikely, the poor, the oppressed, the widows and orphans, the misbegotten. Our faith centers on God who became poor and oppressed, a wandering prophet in an occupied land, and who gathered to him the outcasts and the unlikely. Our response cannot be that of the rich man in our story. He is the only one in the gospel of Mark to come to Jesus and to reject Jesus' call to follow, Jesus' offer of healing. He tells Jesus that he has been careful all his life not to sin against his fellow humans. Of course, it is possible to go through life never doing any harm, but also never doing anything gracious and generous. This man has missed the point of the commandments. His rejection of Jesus' call to use what he has to help the poor reveals his failure of compassion.

I want to offer this morning two very concrete actions that we can take, individually and as a congregation, to answer the call of Jesus to use what we have to minister to those in need. First, let me call your attention to some copies of a brochure in our narthex. It comes from Sojourners and Call to Renewal and it's based on Jim Wallis' best selling book, God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it. The brochure is called "Voting God's Politics." Now, I don't expect all of us to agree with everything in this brochure. I know there are some things in it that I would have approached differently. But the focus of the brochure is given by the verse from Proverbs printed on the first fold: "Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights

of the poor and needy.” I don’t believe in partisan politics in the pulpit. When I stand before you and criticize or praise politicians, I try very hard to make it for what they do or do not do and not for what party they belong to. But I urge you, whether you think of yourself as Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green or any other designation, look at the issues in this brochure and, come November, let a candidate’s response to the poor of our world be your guide to voting.

I also don’t like to stand in this pulpit and ask you for money. I think the more that happens, the more we play into that cultural proclivity to base our value system on dollars, so I don’t do it very often. We are coming up to the time of year when we must formulate our church budget for the upcoming year and as a result we are beginning our stewardship drive. We will all be asked in the next few weeks to pledge an amount of money we are willing to give towards the work of our church. As we do this, I want us all to keep the following concept in mind. Throughout my life, most of the churches where I’ve worshipped have practiced what some call a congregational tithe. The idea is that 10% (or more) of the church’s regular budget gifts are earmarked to go outside the church, to ministries not controlled by us, in other cities or other countries. Again, that’s a percentage of the regular tithes and offerings to the church. It doesn’t include special offerings for World Missions or America for Christ or One Great Hour of Sharing or the 30-Hour Famine or any other special designated giving. The tithe may go to one ministry or many; to the church’s home denomination or a non-denominational group or even to a specific church that is in need. But the point is, that it’s some percentage of what you might call our General Fund.

In the past, I’ve been a member of churches that have sent as much as 24% of their “General Fund” budget to outside missions. I don’t think we’re at the point in our life as a congregation that we can afford that. At Good Shepherd in 2006, what our budget refers to as “Mission Obligations,” that is missions spending out of our General Fund, totals \$1,250, or about 2% of our budget. At the Annual Meeting of our Evergreen Association this weekend, Lee, Lannon and I heard a very eloquent appeal for each congregation to give at least \$1,000 more this year to ABC-USA, our denomination. More than 60% of that money will come back to Evergreen. That’s just one example of a missions need that we can help meet and that extra \$1,000 would take our missions giving from general fund to about 3.5%. I want to ask you all for two things this morning. First, let’s consider raising our missions giving to at least 5%, half of a congregational tithe. That will mean all of us, myself included, have to seriously consider how we can raise our own giving to Good Shepherd to accomplish this and keep our budget in balance. Second, I would like to hear from as many of you as have an opinion about what outside ministry this extra money should go to. I will tell you frankly, you probably shouldn’t consider IHNS as a potential beneficiary. Steve Calkins has reported to the deacons and will bring a full report to all of us in a couple of Sundays, that the effort to restart IHNS has failed. But there are lots of other worthy organizations out there and I want to be sure that we consider any and all of them that any of us care about. I’m not asking what Jesus asked. I’m not asking anyone to sell what they have to give the money to the poor. I think this is something we can do. I know we’re looking at several special projects of our own: a new sign, relandscaping the “pea patches,” our wedding garden, all sorts of things. But let’s make sure that some of the money we dedicate to God’s work is going out into other ministries and other parts of our community and world.

After all, Jesus has called to us over the tumult of our lives – “Look at all the good things you have and, Christian, love me more than these.” We have enough, more than enough in most cases, more than enough to spare. Hebrews 4 tells us, “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” We are accountable in all things to God, even in our money. Now, hear the good news: that same scripture tells us this about Jesus, “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” We may need a little help, a little mercy and grace to escape the trap of prosperity. If we do, Jesus, that young and fearless prophet is there for us.