

Sharing the Wealth
1 Timothy 6:6-19 Luke 16:19-31
September 29, 2019

We always tend to think we will have more time. We assume we will get another chance to set things right. It is difficult to imagine that this moment, this present moment might be “it”. Like the rich man, we have a hard time imagining that we won’t get another chance. Even after the rich man died, he still didn’t understand the whole concept of compassion, of sharing the wealth. He still thought that Lazarus could be ordered around, still thought Lazarus was somehow less important than him.

One of the fascinating things about this story from Luke is the fact that Lazarus is named but the rich man is not. This is very different than the world in which we live, isn’t it? In our world, in our society, the people who have a lot of money are often public figures just because they are wealthy. It is a very strange thing to reflect on this because it is in such contrast to the teachings of the Bible. It is strange and actually very uncomfortable, when we consider how far we are from the ways that Jesus exemplified. In our country, there are people who are famous just because they are rich. We even have several popular television shows that follow the lives and lifestyles of wealthy families. *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* is in its 17th season, so this fascination isn’t just a blip in our social consciousness. The question is, how do we move our attention from this pervasive valuing of wealth for its own sake, to the perspective of Jesus?

First Timothy says *“the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”* I think we can agree that we see this happening, if not in our own lives, then in the culture at large. Our country makes it a point to separate church and state, but in our striving to keep religion out of politics, we have actually created a vacuum in which we have no moral or ethical compass. This has given rise to a situation in which money and the love of money have quite a loud voice. It takes money to run for office, particularly to run for a higher office like senator or president. And think of how our nation makes decisions with regard to our concern for the climate. One of the first questions asked is “how much will it cost to do business this way?” not “what is best for the environment?” So how can we realign our politics so that they are in keeping with the core values taught not only by Jesus, but by most faith traditions? I think it has to start at home. It has to begin by each of us making our own choices in ways that reflect what we believe about where all of the gifts of our lives come from to begin with.

When I was first starting out in ministry I served in a church where several students from Drew Theological School worshipped as members of the congregation while they were going through seminary. I visited a young couple in married student housing one day and never forgot what I saw there. The woman of the couple showed me her budgeting system. It consisted of a clutch of white envelopes, each carefully labeled with expenses they needed to account for every month – rent, books, food, tuition – the normal things you would expect. But one envelope was labeled “tithe”. She pulled that one out and said that they put their tithe of 10% of their income in there before they filled any of the other envelopes. I was surprised that they did this first, because it seemed risky. I knew money was very tight for them. It went against the norm to pay anything but hard and fast debts first, and yet she assured me that they always had enough money left over after setting their tithe aside to pay their bills, plenty of money to buy food. She told me that they felt a sense of joy in knowing that their priority was supporting God’s work, and that it was exciting to figure out what ministries they wanted to give their tithe to each month. Part of it always went to the church, but they set some of their tithe aside to give as God directed them – sometimes to a neighbor who was going through

a rough patch, sometimes to a special program or ministry they heard about. She said that even though they didn't have much, they felt rich being able to participate in doing God's work. I have never forgotten the lesson I learned that day. I am particularly glad that it came to me early on in my ministry because it has helped me understand the nature of true wealth, wealth that comes from God and miraculously provides for our needs and even seems to increase as we put it to good use.

A middle-aged man I met some years later exemplifies the flip side of this perspective. After I shared the story of the young seminary couple as part of a sermon, this man came up to me and said that he made too much money to tithe. I was confused by his comment and asked him what he meant. He said that when you don't make much money then it is okay to give 10% away because your tithe doesn't add up to very much, but once you start making "real money" then it doesn't make sense. He said it would be crazy and would get out of hand pretty quickly if he gave that much of his money away. I think this illustrates our culture's perception of money. If we are poor, then we assume that we are dependent on God to help us make ends meet, so it makes sense to give some of this money back to God. But when we start earning a larger income, then somehow we begin thinking of it as *our money* rather than God's. We might *choose* to give some of it to God, but we don't think we really *owe* God anything. We don't think we owe anyone else anything either, which pushes us to close ourselves off from others out of the fear that they might want something from us. This can make for a rather lonely existence.

Ubuntu is a Nguni African word. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it in this way – *"Ubuntu ... speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, 'Yu, u nobunto'; 'Hey so-and-so has ubuntu.' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, 'My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.' We belong in a bundle of life."* I love that simple phrase and the picture it conjures up – that we belong in a bundle of life. We are all wrapped up in life with one another. No one is outside the wonderful, often messy bundle that is this shared life of ours. Throughout the month of September we have been examining the various ways in which we are meant to care for Creation. This week's scriptures help us recognize that we have a responsibility toward one another as human beings as well as for the planet. None of us can claim that we don't belong, and we can't claim that certain other people don't belong either. We really do belong in one big bundle of life and the well being of one person affects the well being of everyone else. The question for us becomes, what choices will we make? Will we act as if we believe that we are truly a part of the whole, a member of God's big beautiful family? Or will we try to set ourselves apart somehow, try to avoid responsibility for one another? And if we accept that we are a part of some larger whole, and that everything we have is actually all a gift, then how will we put it to use? How will we share the wealth that God has given to us – whether it shows up as thousands of dollars in a hefty paycheck or a small handful of change that we manage to scrape together?

The apostle Paul puts it this way in his first letter to Timothy, *"Tell those who are rich not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which will soon be gone, but their pride and trust should be in the living God who always richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and should give happily to those in need, always being ready to share with others whatever God has given them. By doing this they will be storing up real treasure for themselves in heaven—it is the only safe investment for eternity! And they will be living a fruitful Christian life down here as well."*

Let us pray together – *God, we ask for your help as we consider the wealth you have given to us. Help us know how best to use these gifts of ours. May we be generous financially and generous in matters of the heart. May we be good companions to one another on this journey of life and good stewards of this precious Earth. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*