

2/12/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Good morning! Thank you to the members of the handbell choir. The music you create reminds us of how everyone in the body of Christ has a place and a role, and we do our best to work together.

Welcome to our hour of worship on a beautiful winter morning. We are blessed to be able to come together as a community of people, including those who are very much a part of us watching on Zoom.

Later today many of us may take in the Super Bowl with the Chiefs again playing. This singular event seems to bring our country together. Yet we are brought together by our shared faith as we remember where our source of life and breath and salvation is found.

This will be our second Sunday of our series on Stewardship, where we address the sometimes-awkward topic of money. We look forward to Lynel's children's story as well and also to wrestling with the teaching of Jesus our teacher together.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Taken from Psalms 107, 49, and 65

L: Let us give thanks to you, Lord, for you are good;

P: Your faithful love lasts forever!

L: You visit the earth and make it abundant; You provide people with grain.
Drenching the earth's furrows, leveling its ridges,
you soften it with rain showers; you bless its growth.

**P: The meadowlands are covered with flocks, the valleys decked out in grain—
they shout for joy; they break out in song!**

L: Listen to this, all you people! people of every kind, rich and poor alike!

**P: People won't live any longer because of wealth;
they're just like the animals that pass away.**

L: Let everyone thank you, LORD, for your faithful love
because you satisfied the one who was parched with thirst,

P: You filled up the hungry with good things!

L: Let us give thanks to you, Lord, for you are good;

All: Your faithful love lasts forever!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Creator God,

Your faithful love lasts forever! You brought us into being. You gave us bodies and endowed us with all the things we need to live.

Our wealth is not what makes us important, nor is it the true source of our life.

We find our life in you. May we be present and alive to you in our worship today.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

O God, we have just sung powerful words of praise and allegiance to you – words of assurance that your ways are good and sure. We just sang that we will trust in you alone and follow you alone. We sang of your life everlasting, the freedom that our souls find in you and the promise that we will live for you alone. These are simple words but big statements. Give us clarity and courage as we try to live them out...

Light into the world, light into our lives – We will live for you alone.

You're the one we seek, knowing we will find all we need in you alone.

There are so many distractions...so many reasons and ways for us to take our eyes off the prize and to lose sight of following you, Jesus. We confess that as heartily as we might sing, and as surely as we WANT to seek you and live for you, we need the presence of your Holy Spirit to keep us focused, to keep our good intentions front and center. We depend on you, God, to help us live out our faith. Bless our efforts and our intentions so that our lives can be reflections of your love.

Dear Lord, we pray for a deeper understanding of the stories you told and their meaning for our lives. Open our minds and our hearts to hear your hard truths about wealth and how to steward it, how to be responsible for the resources in our care.

We pray, O God, for the thousands in Turkey and Syria whose lives have been literally shaken to their foundations and beyond. The destruction and loss there is beyond what we can imagine or comprehend. We pray for compassion, for mercy and for comfort. We pray for generosity and love to prevail and that greed and lust for power would recede and be swallowed up. We pray for those who are working to search and rescue, to bind up and heal. We pray for their strength and stamina. We pray that the rest of the world would respond with generosity and gracious care.

We pray for those in our own circles of friends, family, neighborhoods and communities who are struggling with illnesses – physical, emotional or spiritual. God, you are the great healer, our creator and the caretaker of our bodies and souls. We pray for healing in its many forms to come to those we know and love, that they might be fully restored in body, mind and spirit. In these moments of silence, we bring those people to mind who we know need your healing...

Lord, hear our prayers.

God, I pray for Kris Schmucker as she travels this week to Germany to meet up with Kara. Grant them safety and joy as they reunite after several years of not seeing one another and travel together. Bless their time together.

Be with us as a congregation in the coming weeks and months, Lord. As the boards and committees begin this new year with some new members and some new ideas, continue to guide us, challenge and push us and also comfort and assure us of your love and presence. Be especially with the Board of Mission and Service and the Church Council as they will all meet tomorrow evening. Thank you, God, for each person involved and their willingness to serve our congregation in these roles. Be with us now as we continue to worship and learn of you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

JESUS' TEACHING ON WEALTH – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Mark 10:17-27, Luke 12:13-21

INTRO

This Sunday is our second looking at the sometimes-uncomfortable topic of money. This morning's scripture passages illustrate Jesus' surprising and challenging teaching about wealth.

That verse about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's Kingdom gets our attention, but what does that really mean?

Are we among the rich?

There are internet sites that allow you to calculate where you would fall on the global scale. For example, a family of four with \$50,000 of post-tax annual income makes more than almost 90% of people in the world, and about 6.5 times the median household income in the world.

The site says this based not on actual dollar figures, but adjusting for what would be the equivalent purchasing power of a dollar in each country. If you used actual exchange rates, the disparity would look even larger.

That suggests that most of us should consider ourselves to be "rich." We live in one of the richest countries. Most of the time, we are hardly troubled by a verse that would seem to suggest on its face that we are cut off from the life of God's kingdom. That's not a very motivating thing to come to church to hear.

Of course, you could argue back that it would be hard to live in the United States if you actually tried to limit yourself to the resources of the average global citizen. That would be less than \$8,000 for a family of four.

You wouldn't be able to be a functioning member of society. You would likely be homeless. Your children would be disadvantaged if they would want to function in mainstream society as adults. It seems like it's this is not an apples to apples comparison – to not be in a marginalized place in the US, you have to have resources.

There may be truth to all of that, but let's wrestle for a minute with what Jesus may actually have been saying.

MARK 10

A man with wealth came to Jesus asking, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

One can picture the word "inherit" coming quite naturally to the mind of a man of means. But he clearly has seen something in Jesus that attracts him. He calls Jesus "good," and kneels down.

Jesus gives a pretty straight-up Sunday school answer: "Well, sir, are you keeping the commandments?"

"All these I've kept from my youth."

Jesus listed off several of the 10 commandments. If you want to be really specific, Jesus substitutes "you shall not defraud," for "you shall not covet." This man apparently has come by his money by totally legal, honest means.

Jesus looks at the man and loves him. The Gospel writer seems to want to say that Jesus didn't give a hard answer simply to dismiss the man because he doesn't like him. Because Jesus cares about the guy, Jesus will tell him the truth.

"One thing evades you," Jesus says, "you must sell all you have and give to the poor."

The man was absolutely shocked, maybe appalled, that Jesus would say this. Jesus has just given him a command that is impossible.

He is spiritually sincere enough that he doesn't just dismiss Jesus or storm off angrily. Instead he leaves the conversation grieved. He sought from Jesus either assurance that he would have life in the next world, or that there would be a righteous deed he could certainly do that would give him that assurance.

Jesus asked him to do the one thing he could not do.

"See with what difficulty those with wealth come into the Kingdom of God!" Jesus observed.

I interpret this statement as: "It is really difficult for a wealthy person to be ready to enter into God's kingdom." The opposite of that would be observing that it is easy for children – naïve, carefree, and totally dependent. Easier also for those who have reached a point where they have nothing to lose. When you have little to lose, the preaching of the kingdom can only be good news.

The response astounds Jesus' disciples. Maybe even leaves them dumbfounded. Part of the reason for that is it was common to think – even taught by the Rabbis – that God rewarded the righteous by blessing them with wealth.

Many people in Central America also seemed to me to have this assumption. From my standpoint coming from a wealthy country and observing such deeply religious who prayed,

fasted, and went to church as often as six days a week. It just didn't compute that wealth was indicative of being more righteous.

If the disciples overhearing the conversation likely assumed the man was wealthy because he was righteous, that explains their question: "Who, then, can be saved?" If a man righteous enough to be blessed by God in this life still isn't righteous enough to enter the next, then who would be?"

But they are missing the point and spiritual truth Jesus is teaching. Jesus saw that the man was attached to his wealth. It was part of who he was, and what gave him both social importance and made him feel important and significant inside. The wealthier you are – and maybe also the more accomplished you are – the harder it is to let go of that.

A camel going through the eye of a needle is simply a graphic way of saying – impossible. The Rabbis spoke similarly of the impossibility of an elephant going through the eye of a needle. The largest common animal going through the smallest common hole.

LUKE 12

On another occasion, Jesus told a parable about successful farmer who had such good harvests he could retire and live off of the stored grain. He just needed to put up a few more silos to store it.

Now he had it made and could take it easy in a way few people in the ancient world ever could, where life was constant toil and struggle to survive. Jesus condemned the attitude of the man.

Jesus did not condemn the stored grain itself. What Jesus condemned was the attitude of self-sufficiency that we so pride in this country. It's the attitude that we are just fine. We can take care of ourselves. I've got my hard-earned money. I owe nothing to anyone.

It's not very far from that to land up saying, "I can save myself."

"What is your life?" the early leader James later asked, "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

"Sell what you have, give to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven," Jesus said to the rich man.

In Luke 12, Jesus taught that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Your heart will be in what you most value. Your character will reflect what you actually live for, regardless of what you say you live for. If you want to change your heart, dedicate your time and energy to the things you want to truly value.

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Coming back to our first story, Jesus went on to tell his disciples that what is impossible for people is still possible with God. This leaves the door open. It isn't impossible for those of us who are rich.

Usually we this statement is taken to mean that we are saved by grace, which I absolutely agree with. We all fall short and participate in broken systems and need God's grace.

The mistake many forms of Christianity seem to make is viewing entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven as if it is a gate that is either locked or unlocked, and God as judge decides whether or not to open it for you.

If you are so lucky, it's as simple as simply stepping through – no inner work or spiritual transformation required.

While there may be passage suggestive of the courtroom picture, Jesus' shift from "inheriting eternal life," to "entering the kingdom of God," suggests this is first of all about a change in us. A change in us, so that our way of being and living in the world is an entering into the Kingdom, is living in the way of the Kingdom.

Maybe the thing that is impossible for us but possible for God is a change in our souls. God can change even the hardest heart. But to allow God to do that work in our lives, we must first be aware that we even *need* God to do that work in our hearts. And then we have to invite God to do that.

God desires a change in us, and God also desires that everyone has their basic needs met.

If this was just about the man letting go of his attachment to his wealth, Jesus could have told him, "Go take everything you have, put it in a pile, and burn it!" That would be equally difficult, but it wouldn't help anyone.

You see wealth is both a blessing and a problem.

Wealth is a blessing, because resources that are equitable and accessible to all are necessary for human beings to thrive (as creatures who live in physical bodies) as well as human communities to thrive.

Wealth is a problem because we substitute it for God. We substitute it for discovering our true selves, and discovering true relationship of love, based on valuing ourselves and others for who we are, and not what we have.

Wealth is also a problem when it is in the hands of a few, while others go hungry.

That is why Jesus says, "give to the poor," instead of "burn it." The grain, the houses, the gold, or whatever this man had – there's nothing wrong with that. But it needed to be shared.

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There's a lot here for us to wrestle with as citizens of one of the wealthiest countries. Many of us in this room, if we actually calculated our assets or net wealth could probably purchase many times more than what the "rich" man of Jesus' day could have, simply because we live in a society with far more resource-abundance than in Jesus' day.

So we must wrestle with what Jesus' teaching means for us.

What does God ask of us? What steps do we take to allow God to do the work of spiritual transformation in our hearts? To transfer our treasure from bank accounts to God's kingdom? What steps might we take to practice justice, and be a part of caring for the poor?

Perhaps you are called to determine what you need to live both well and frugally. And you are generous or give away whatever you have beyond that.

The guideline of giving 10% and saving 10%, and limiting your spending to the other 80% may be practical advice for your personal finances.

I also believe we are called to live with a tension. This means being willing to be uncomfortable with having our own needs met as long as there are people who lack basic needs.

I'm *not* saying be guilt-stricken or be ashamed, just be willing to feel that discomfort, that tension. This tension can motivate us to be creative, to be different than the model our society gives to us. To be counter-cultural in how we choose to engage with money and the material resources available to us.

Those of us who are wealthy can find encouragement in the fact that the NT speaks positively of a number of wealthy individuals:

Zacchaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, the wealthy women who supported Jesus' ministry financially, Cornelius the centurion, or Lydia.

We can learn their stories, how they responded to Jesus. The common denominator is their generosity.

Our transformation is found in practicing contentment and in practicing generosity. Our wealth is an opportunity for generosity.

We look forward to hearing more about the topic of generosity next week.

BENEDICTION

May God bless you in all forms of abundance: material, relational, and most of all the spiritual abundance of generosity.

May we most of all share the spiritual wealth of being sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ.