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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24B)

October 18, 2015

Text: Mark 10:23–31

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For the second week in a row, we must wrestle with our wealth. I know, you're anxiety level is probably starting to rise a little. Here we go again...the church needs more money. The offerings are lagging behind. It's time to dig deep. Well, not so fast. To my knowledge, our offerings are doing pretty good. I have no plans to make any special appeals for more money today, next week, or at any time in the future.

Such anxiety grows, in part, out of the fact that the Christian Church has had a rather questionable history regarding its use of money and wealth. During the Reformation era, the papacy authorized a special indulgence for the purpose of raising funds for the renovation and completion of St. Peter's in Rome. That special indulgence and the excesses of the indulgence preachers – “as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs” – got Martin Luther so riled up that he wrote the 95 Theses. And off went the Reformation...! In today's time, we've endured the travesty of the prosperity preachers who preach that if you give (to their ministries) in faith, God will give back even more. Giving to the Church is the safest, most lucrative investment you can make, or so we were told.

But then, we're confronted with the Biblical teaching on wealth. Ecclesiastes 5:10 states, “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.” In other words, the rich always want to get richer; that next million is never enough. Well, that's only in the OT and everyone knows that Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon during one of those gloomy times of life. Well, not so fast. Listen to the apostle Paul and what he teaches the young pastor Timothy:

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs (I Tim 6:9–10).

You want to increase senseless desires that will endanger your eternal soul? Seek more and more wealth says the NT apostle.

And then there's Jesus teaching about wealth. It begins in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:24), "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." It's either God or money who calls the shots, not both. And last week, we heard Jesus tell an earnest yet rich young ruler that (Mark 10:21), "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." That was an amazing moment. The rich young ruler wanted to inherit eternal life. And Jesus responds to his request with total divestiture or nothing. No middle ground. It's all or nothing.

The rich young ruler chose his wealth rather than following Jesus. The verse just before today's reading says this (vs. 22), "Disheartened by the saying, he (i.e., the rich, young ruler) went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." It's quite possible that this disheartened rich, young ruler is still in eyeshot when Jesus says (vs. 23), "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" The wealthier you are, the harder it will be for you to be Christian. Wow! That seems to be the exact opposite of the prosperity preachers.

The Lord's disciples are amazed (vs. 24). And then exceedingly astonished (vs. 26) after Jesus says "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (vs. 24–25). Who then can be saved if the rich don't have the inside track? The camel was the largest land animal known to the Mediterranean world. They don't fit through the eye of a needle. Half the time I can't get a piece of thread through a needle's eye. It's impossible!

And by the way, you hear from time to time that some ancient cities had a smaller gate within the larger, outer gate called the "eye of a needle" through which camels could pass through if made to waddle on their knees without any baggage. There is no evidence that such a gate ever existed. The point of Jesus' illustration is that such an achievement is impossible, from a human perspective. That's what the Lord Himself says, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God" (vs. 27).

After this rather quick review of the Bible's teaching on wealth, you may be ready to throw up your hands and cry "uncle!" What on earth are we to do with our material possessions? On the one hand, we know we need earthly things to live, survive, and take care of our families. On the other hand, the more possessions we have, the greater danger to our eternal souls and the souls of those who live under our care, such as children and other family members.

It needs to be said here that being rich and wealthy is not wrong or evil. The Bible describes many men and women who were wealthy and faithful to God in their daily lives. And the Bible does describe material prosperity as being a blessing of the Lord. It must also be said that being poor and needy doesn't give you any special status before God. Our material possessions have no bearing whatsoever in whether or not we have a righteous standing before God. The danger of wealth is that we humans tend to equate material prosperity with being in God's good graces. Conversely, we too often conclude that the lack of money is an indicator of God's disfavor.

So why does the Lord Jesus state the rich and wealthy have a harder time entering God's kingdom? Material wealth presents a very real and dangerous temptation as it promises the same things that God promises—happiness, security, and prosperity—only it has one advantage. You can physically see, feel, hear, taste, and smell the proof of material wealth. God's promises are received by faith not by sight. In other words, our day to day experiences aren't able to confirm or deny God's blessings. They are based upon a promise of greater things yet to come in the resurrection on the Last Day. Material wealth in and of itself isn't either good or bad; God creates and distributes them as He sees fit. The question is always about your relationship to your material possessions. Do you fear, love, and trust in them above all things or do you fear, love, and trust in God above all things? Do you master your material resources so that they aid you in service to God and neighbor? Or do they master you so that you serve them to the exclusion of God and neighbor?

Jesus promises us in today's gospel reading that whatever we give up in service to Him and His gospel, we will receive again in this life by a hundredfold and in the age to come eternal life (vs. 29–30). In other words, we need not worry about our material possessions. He will take care of our needs now and for all eternity. That's what makes everything different for us Christians. Jesus not only forgives our sins, cleanses us from the impurities of our sinful natures, fills us with the Holy Spirit, and makes us His beloved children, but He also promises to provide for us in this earthly life so that He brings us safely to our eternal home which He Himself is preparing for us. In all

things, our Lord promises to give abundantly, although we need to hear His cautionary warning. We receive blessings in this life “with persecutions” (vs. 30). As believers who are baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, we will follow the same path of opposition as Jesus. But that also means we follow the same path of victory as Jesus. The cross and empty tomb place their indelible mark upon every aspect of our redeemed lives.

I said earlier only God can save the wealthy. That impossible task, only God can do. But then again, only God in Christ can accomplish the impossible deed of saving the poor or the middle class. Regardless of the size of our bank accounts and assets, we must die to ourselves and live in faith toward God alone and in love to our neighbor. Or as Jesus put it, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (vs. 31). That’s what Jesus was doing on the cross, becoming the last and least of all in loving service to the world. On Good Friday, His Father raised Him up to be the first of the new creation, the founder and perfecter of all the redeemed. We are as rich as the Lord Jesus is. What He obtains in His death and resurrection, He gives to us. It all belongs to us in Christ Jesus. He is our wealth and treasure, now and forever.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.