

“What Makes A Life?”

Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
February 17, 2019, 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Based upon Psalm 24; Luke 18: 18-30

Stacey Elizabeth Simpson, a Baptist pastor, tells about hearing this story of the rich ruler in Sunday School when she was seven years old. It worried her. She thought about it all day and before bed that night, she said to her mom, “You know, Mom, Jesus says that rich people have a hard time getting into heaven.”

“Go to sleep, baby,” her mom said. “There’s absolutely no need to worry because we are NOT rich!”

At seven years old she strongly disagreed with her mother. She had a bedroom of her own with matching bedspread, pillow sham, dust ruffle, and curtains. She had shelves full of books and bins full of toys. Every morning she sat at the kitchen table and had breakfast. She carried a very cool lunch box to school filled with all things she liked to eat. She could ride her bike on sidewalks that were safe and take dance lessons. She was rich, and she knew it. This seven-year-old heard the words of Jesus clearly and they made her think. These words worried her.

These past weeks, Pastor Elizabeth has been dealing with the challenging concepts of the paradoxes of our faith. Today we think about the paradox of rich and poor because our scriptures speak a lot about wealth and the power it can have over us. The scriptures also teach us that the poor have a very special place in God’s heart. So in order to be rich with God’s love, do we need to be poor economically?

“Well, the concept of rich and poor can mean a lot of things. It’s not always about money,” you might say. “I just went to Puerto Rico and saw poor people who were rich with blessings, and I know rich people who are very poor in their spirits.”

All of that may be true, but I think it’s often the way we avoid talking about wealth and poverty. Like Stacey’s mom, it’s easier to brush aside the topic and think, “Jesus wouldn’t be talking with us because we are not rich.” So, we don’t place ourselves in the shoes of this rich ruler. But that may be exactly what God intends for us to do. It’s not a comfortable place to be. Seven-year old Stacey understood that. This story is indeed a lesson in wealth, means, and privilege and the power that can hold over us.

Stacey’s mom said that they were not rich, and Stacey knew they were. So, who was right? Scripture doesn’t offer too many metrics about what would place one in the category of being rich in Jesus’ day so that we could make a comparison to our day. Is it income, hourly wage, money in the bank, property owned, financial portfolio, or the value of your possessions? Do you have to be in the top one percent to be wealthy?

So, like it or not, here he is again today, this ruler who comes to Jesus and asks the question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He knew his capabilities and probably thought he could pull it off and do whatever it took to inherit eternal life. This question about

eternal life was common in Jesus' day because the Jewish people were divided. The Sadducees rejected the idea of eternal life because it's not in the Torah. The Pharisees and the Essenes affirmed a hope of resurrection but the nature and the basis for eternal life was vigorously debated.

This story is told in all three Gospels, so it is important. Each Gospel writer tells it a little differently. Matthew tells us he was a young man. Mark tells us he was just a man. In today's lesson from *Luke*, he's a ruler, and we don't hear that he's rich until towards the end of the passage.

What is consistent in all three Gospels is that Jesus' answer is "Sell what you own and distribute the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and then come and follow me."

What is consistent in all three Gospels is that this man, this young man, or this ruler walks away from Jesus.

What is consistent in all three Gospels is that Jesus teaches "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus is honest with this ruler. There is nothing, absolutely nothing he can do to pull off inheriting eternal life. Because it's already been given to him and us too. It's God who gives life; it's God who pours out grace upon grace. Salvation is not our doing. It's not our accomplishment. It's an act of divine initiative and grace. It is pure gift, not because of what we do, not because we have earned it, but because we are loved.

This ruler has already been given eternal life.

But, what do we do when we receive a gift? We respond! And that is the issue here. The response to God's gift is up to us. God's hope is that we will be respond in faithfulness. But we also have the choice to walk away. God will not force us to make a choice of faithfulness.

We have to understand that when we choose faithfulness to God, everything in our lives and in our world does not automatically become clear and fall into place. Faithfulness is a journey and sometimes a confusing one. Our faithfulness is a work in progress. Every day we have to consciously make that choice to put God at the center reminding ourselves that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

This ruler's response to God's generosity was **lacking**. "How wonderful that you know the commandments and that you have kept them since your youth." Jesus is not disparaging that aspect of his faith formation. But Jesus is confronting the reality that this ruler's possessions own him. They are first in his life, well before God. This ruler's treasure was not God. His treasure was what he owned.

Accomplishments, money, degrees, possessions are not in and of themselves bad things. They can be very good things.

But when we belong to those things rather than them belonging to us, when they completely define us, when we believe that we would lose our personhood, our identity, our security, our very lives if these would go away... then God gets pushed aside and becomes an expendable entity in our lives.... Nice to have around as long as it's convenient for us and God doesn't demand too much.

It is very true that scripture teaches that the widows, strangers, children, the marginalized, the poor have a very special place in God's heart because the state of poverty and despair violates God's intentions for human life.

So those who would inherit God's gracious, generous, and free gifts must also be committed to the care of these people. It's part of a faithful response.

This story is an economic lesson. The biblical scholar, Ched Meyers, reminds Christians that scripture talks about wealth and the power it holds over us. Scripture does instruct God's people to dismantle and examine those influences of wealth and power that come to own us and mean more than they should to the point that there isn't enough for everyone and the poor.... Well, they probably got themselves into that state and there's really not a lot that we can do and we have to watch out for ourselves first and foremost. It's an inadequate response to God. **It is lacking.**

As Christians, we should think very seriously about how we are responding in today's world. What owns us? Rather than being vessels for God's work, where are we blocking God's good intentions?

We have to place ourselves in this ruler's shoes and understand where our response to God is lacking.

Arthur Ashe, the famous tennis player wrote a book soon after he was diagnosed with AIDS called, "Days of Grace." In that book he writes: "I am thankful that I have enough money to live comfortably. I much prefer having it to not having it. But I have learned well what money can do for me and what it cannot do for me. You see from what we get, we make a living. But from what we give, from what we share, from what we let go of.... We make a life."

This response of faithfulness to God is always a work in progress with us, easier on some days than on others. But if we realize our dependence on God and that God is our source of strength, God will equip us to be vessels of love, grace, and hope in this world. Jesus said, "Come and follow me and you will find your real treasures."

Jesus taught yet another lesson in this story. "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God."

It's tall order. It's a work in progress, and some days, it's hard to believe all that our faith asks us to believe.

But we can make a life of faithfulness by belonging to God and allowing God and God alone to own us. For what is impossible for us is possible for God.

We make a life and live and work and respond into the hope that there will be justice. Children will be nothing less than blessed. The poor will receive sustenance.

And you know what? That camel just might make it through the eye of the needle.

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

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