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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Y37
21 Pentecost 23B 11 a.m. Eucharist, 3 p.m. EP and 6 p.m. Eucharist
Sunday 14 October 2018 Stewardship

Job 23:1-9, 16-17
Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

The Truth About Wealth: We Lack One Thing

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4).

The truth about wealth is simple. You are poor. No matter who you are, or what you have, it will not be enough to save yourself.

Bruce Springsteen writes, "People don't come to rock shows to learn something. They come to be reminded of something they already know and feel deep in their gut. That when the world is at its best, when we are at our best, when life feels fullest, one and one equals three... It's the reason the universe will never be fully comprehensible."¹

We know deep in our hearts that wealth cannot really protect us – and yet our possessions still own us. Somehow we cannot transcend this myth. And no one around us seems able to either.

Jesus is going on the way, the road. Hodon, that's the Greek word for it. Before the name Christian became popular, "the way" was what they called the movement. It was how Jesus' disciples referred to themselves. So Jesus is traveling the way, or the path of faith. Suddenly a rich man throws himself down before him in the same manner as people seeking healing beg for Jesus' help.

The man asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life" (Mk. 10)? From the start Jesus seems to bristle at the question as if its assumptions are all wrong. You can almost hear Jesus sigh and say that eternal life is not some kind of prize rewarded for intense spiritual effort. God's love is not something that anyone can win or inherit. In Jesus' words, "no one is good but God alone."

Jesus instructs him to keep the commandments. And when the man says he has, Jesus gazes at him.² Jesus loves him. He says, "You lack one thing... sell what you own... give the money to the poor... then come, follow me." The shocked man goes, "away grieving, for he had many possessions."

Jesus says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God... it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God."

The disciples can't believe it. For them, and often for us, wealth seems like a blessing from God, not a barrier to spiritual wholeness. And Jesus says, "For God all things are possible." This morning I have a simple question for you. What was it that this man lacked?

Followers of Jesus' way have struggled with this story for two thousand years. Some have interpreted it as a justification for monastic vows of poverty. Others have written

that Jesus' instruction is a diagnosis only for this particular man, or for a select number of special believers. Not even the disciples who followed Jesus sold their property and gave the proceeds to the poor.

From St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215) in the second century to now there has been no shortage of theologians who have said that this story is not ultimately about money at all. They suggest it is about spiritual pride, or it is against our tendency to think that what we have done obliges God to give us eternal life in return.³ I think Jesus' story is about the connection between our deepest longings and God.

On Tuesday night after our Yoga practice I interviewed the Christian theologian Matthew Fox with Lama Tsomo an American born Tibetan Buddhist.⁴ Lama Tsomo described going to bed on the eve of her eighth birthday wondering what she should wish for when she blew out the candles. That night she realized that the wisest wish was to be happy. She made that wish every year until she became a teenager but throughout her life she never seemed to come closer to actually being happy.

When her children were young she tried meditating but she wasn't sure if it was working. After studying Jungian psychology she went to live in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. She describes her loneliness and how difficult it was to learn Tibetan.

Her breakthrough came when she realized that each person is like an ocean wave. We desperately do everything we can to preserve our sense of individuality and uniqueness. When we regard ourselves as only one "splinter of reality" we have immense needs – for social approval, success, etc. But really what we long for is to return to the vast ocean, which has no need because it encompasses everything. In short we desire to experience ourselves as part of the whole.⁵

Yesterday I looked Lama Tsomo up on Wikipedia and discovered that she is an heir to the Hyatt hotel chain. She is worth 1.77 billion dollars. Suddenly her story about a search for happiness and a longing to overcome her sense of isolation came to have a different kind of poignancy.

Jesus' story is a spiritual message about our need for wholeness but it is also a material and economic one too. In the Book of Acts the first followers of the way lived together in Jerusalem, sold their individual property, and shared it with each other "as any had need" (Acts 2:45). The biblical ideal from the gospels (Lk. 14:33) and the Book of Acts is holding property in common. For those who pay attention this is part of the scandal of Christian faith.⁶

Wealth means something different in every generation. I want to point out three things that we are learning about money today. First, meritocracy has become a kind of idol for us. We believe that the rich deserve their wealth and that the rest of society should have no claim on it. This blind belief is driving a lurch toward oligarchy.

I recommend very highly Thomas Piketty's book *Capital: In the Twenty-First Century*. In it he describes the simple mechanism behind this. Changes in the tax code around the year 1980 are leading to vast differences between the wealthy and the poor. In the

1950's, 60's and 70's the highest tax bracket never went below 70 percent (now it is 39.6%).⁷

Since 1980 the richest 1 percent have absorbed nearly 60 percent of the increase in national income. The top ten percent owns 72 percent of the wealth in the United States. The bottom 50 percent owns only 2 percent of all wealth.⁸ We could be on a path toward a future in which there is no middle class.

Second, we have just begun to measure just how destructive poverty can be to the human spirit. Last week our forum guest Robert Sapolsky described poverty as a national health crisis. Children born poor are more likely to suffer neurological effects for the rest of their lives. "By age five, the lower a child's socioeconomic status on average, the (a) higher the basal glucocorticoid levels..., the thinner the frontal cortex... the poorer the working memory, emotion regulation, impulse control, and executive decision-making."⁹ Childhood adversity makes you more likely to struggle as an adult with alcohol and drug addiction and with depression.

Third, Sapolsky also points out scientific evidence that suggests that having more wealth leads people to have less empathy, to be less adept at recognizing people's emotions and even more likely to cheat or steal. If they are told at the end of a study that the leftover candy goes to children, they take more candy than the others.¹⁰

Overall inequality leads to a society with lower amounts of social capital, that is one that has fewer civic organizations from churches, fraternal orders, bowling leagues, arts subscribers, neighborhood improvement groups and lower participation in politics.

The Dalai Lama tells a story about the Buddha's visit to a great king. On the way to the palace the Buddha met a beggar who praised the king and smiled as he spoke about the great beauty of the palace. It was a tradition after the meal to say a blessing, to assign the good karma of the meal to an important person. But instead of dedicating the merit to the host, the Buddha chose the beggar standing outside.

His monks couldn't believe it. They asked why he chose the beggar instead of the king. The Buddha answered that the king was filled with pride in showing off the kingdom but the beggar who had nothing could rejoice in the king's good fortune.¹¹ We too can learn to take pleasure in another person's joy.

There is a space between renouncing everything and a life of total selfishness. That is the world we inhabit. We may have very little control over tax policies but through generosity we can live in a way shaped by God's love. In our actions we can recognize both that we have not all been given an equal chance, and that wealth can cut us off and isolate us.

What did the rich man lack? I'm not sure. Maybe he just couldn't trust God.

Brothers and sisters please do not go away from this place grieving that the way of Jesus is too demanding. In these days of greed and inequality we can hold onto those moments of grace when one plus one equals three. Let us move beyond a narrow focus

on our own inheritance, beyond the conviction that we are solely responsible for our success or failure. Let us allow God to transform our generosity and our whole life.

We are poor. But Jesus sees us, loves us and calls us – because, “for God all things are possible.”

#RobertSapolsky, #ThomasPiketty, #inequality

¹ Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (NY: Simon & Schuster: 2016) 236-7.

² The Greek word *emblepo* means to gaze or to consider.

³ In Clement of Alexandria’s treatise “Who is the Rich Man Who Is Saved?” he writes that wealth can be a serious spiritual problem. Ultimately he writes that Jesus’ words are not to be taken literally. The rich can cultivate a kind of spiritual poverty.

⁴ We discussed their book. Matthew Fox and Lama Tsomo, *The Lotus and the Rose: A Conversation Between Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Christianity* (Namchak Publishing, 2018).

⁵ The ocean has no need it encompasses everything. *Ibid*, 30.

⁶ David Bentley Hart, “Are Christians Supposed to Be Communists?” *The New York Times*, 4 November 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/opinion/sunday/christianity-communism.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-right-region®ion=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region&_r=0

⁷ The highest rate today is 39.6% for households making \$444,551 or more.

https://bradfordtaxinstitute.com/Free_Resources/Federal-Income-Tax-Rates.aspx.

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⁸ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) 297, 257.

⁹ This comes from a study by Martha Farah and Tim Boyce. See Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (NY: Penguin, 2017) 194-7.

¹⁰ Whether a car stops to help someone in need is inversely related to its value. Wealthier people are also more likely to regard the class system as fair and meritocratic, and to believe that their success has more to do with their own ability and hard work rather than other factors. Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (NY: Penguin, 2017) 533-4.

¹¹ Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (NY: Penguin, 2016) 141-2.