

Proverbs 30:5-9
1 Timothy 6:2b-10

World Communion Sunday
October 7, 2018
Midway Presbyterian Church

Neither Poverty Nor Riches

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson today we find a prayer for two things: one has to do with truth and the other has to do with money. Listen to these words from Proverbs 30:5-9...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson this morning we hear warnings about anyone who teaches things that go against the sound instruction of Jesus Christ. And we hear words about how love of money can cause all kinds of problems.. Listen to these words from First Timothy 6:2b-10...

Sermon

Once a poor farmer died and went to heaven. When he reached the pearly gates, he was seated next to a man who was obviously wealthy. In a few moments St. Peter opened the gates and invited the rich man to enter. The farmer peeked through the gates as the two walked into the golden city. What he saw amazed him. A chorus of angels greeted St. Peter and the rich man with a rousing Bach chorale, and people filled the street with shouting. When the noise died down, St. Peter gave a short speech and concluded by saying, "Welcome to the city of God. Make yourself at home." As the rich man walked down the street, people continued to shout and wave.

When it was finally quiet, St. Peter opened the gates and beckoned to the poor farmer. Though he was greeted warmly, there was no angel chorus or great crowd to greet him. "Welcome to the city of God," St. Peter said. "Make yourself at home." The farmer was deeply hurt. "This is the last place I ever thought I would find discrimination," he said to St. Peter. "All my life I have watched the rich gain privileges that the poor were denied. I thought that when I came to the home of God all would be equal. Yet when I enter the gates, I am not greeted by either crowds or choruses.

“My dear friend,” St. Peter said, “I can see how it appears that there is discrimination, but it is not true. Everything will be the same for you as for the rich man. You have to understand that today is a special occasion. We receive poor farmers up here every day, but we haven’t had a rich man in over 80 years.”

One of the great mayors of New York was Fiorello LaGuardia—“the Little Flower.” When a strike kept the Sunday journals off the newsstands, LaGuardia read the funny papers over the radio. Well-known were his squeaky outbursts against the “crooks” and “bums” who would exploit the poor.

One time the mayor chose to preside in a night court. It was bitter cold outside. An old lady was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. Her family, she said, was starving. “I’ve got to punish you,” declared LaGuardia. “The law makes no exceptions. I must fine you ten dollars.” But the mayor added, as he was reaching into his own pocket, “Well, here’s the ten dollars to pay your fine—which I now remit.” He tossed the ten-dollar bill into his famous sombrero. “Furthermore,” he declared, “I’m going to fine everybody in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread in order to eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to this defendant!” The hat was passed and an incredulous old lady, with the light of heaven in her eyes, left the courtroom with a sum of \$47.50.

Scripture can be unsettling to those who have great riches. It speaks of how hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. Of how it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. But happily we learn, God can do the impossible. (Mk. 10:23-27)

Let me say here that this sermon is not an attack on the rich. In the United States the wealthy pay a great amount of the taxes; the top 5% pay almost 60% of all federal

taxes—the top 1% pay almost 40%. Without them, our taxes would go up. The wealthy create jobs; they are a key to a healthy economy. Some give generously to charities. I believe fostering class envy and class warfare is badly mistaken. I think bashing business is badly mistaken. That said, I do think paying CEO's tens of millions of dollars corrupts our system and in the big scheme of things is bad business. But the issue is not how much money we make, but what kind of stewards we are with that money. Do we just build bigger barns and take it easy, or do we show appreciation for what we have, walk humbly, do justly, and love mercy?

The wise man of our scripture in Proverbs deals with poverty and riches, but not before he has praised the truth of God's word. Then in a simple prayer in verse 7-9 we read:

Two things I ask of you;
 Do not deny them to me before I die:
 Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
 (and) give me neither poverty nor riches;
 feed me with the food that I need,
 or I shall be full, and deny you,
 and say, "Who is the Lord?"
 or I shall be poor, and steal,
 and profane the name of my God.

First, remove far from me falsehood and lying. Nothing that is built on falsehood and lies can survive and flourish. Not a government. Not a business. Not an institution. Not a church. Not a family. And not an individual.

Dear God, put falsehood and lies far from me.

That was the first of two things prayed for. Secondly, and where we want to focus today:

give me neither poverty nor riches...

I recall a meeting with a middle-aged woman about her insurance and financial situation. She told me about the house they live in. The mortgage will be paid off in 6

more months. The house, she said, isn't much, but she and her husband and daughter are content. "Wow!" I thought. "The sage of Proverbs would have been well pleased."

To be sure, it seems quite natural to pray for freedom from poverty, but in our society how strange it seems to pray for freedom from wealth. The quality of a college education is often judged by the amount of the tuition, and that can be enormous. Some young people scorn anything but the brand names. Only Nikes will do. Greed leads to the death of many species of plants and animals. Out of greed the rainforests of South America are being destroyed. Someone said, "There's enough in the world for the need of everybody. There is not enough in the world for the greed of everybody."

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote The Great Gatsby in 1925. At first considered a failure, now it is consistently ranked among the greatest works of American literature. This was the "Jazz Age" in America. The economy had soared. Young flappers smoked, drank, and danced the night away. Urged on by advertisers, consumers spent lavishly and extravagantly. Taller and taller buildings reached for the sky. Splashy cars. Pretentious houses. Expensive clothes. Roaring parties. But beneath all the glitter was a moral emptiness and decadence. And the "happy times" mood of the 1920's came to an abrupt end with the Wall Street Crash of 1929, followed by a long period of economic suffering and misery for millions of Americans. As Fitzgerald put it:

The loneliest moment in someone's life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart and all they can do is stare blankly.

Jesus said:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where

thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Mt. 6:19-21)

And in our Epistle Lesson today Paul declares that the love of money is a cause of all kinds of evil.

“Free me from the poverty of riches.” But just as important is the prayer to not be poor. There’s no indication that being poor will necessarily add to one’s spirituality. Sometimes we see quite the contrary. Young people who contemplate dropping out of school might do well to meditate on this proverbial prayer: “Deliver me from being poor.” There’s nothing glorified in being dependent upon government or parents or someone else for one’s financial survival. Surely those who stand in the unemployment lines today, and the family smothered under a mountain of debt, understand the significance of this ancient prayer: “Deliver me from poverty.”

And then the scripture concludes:

feed me with the food that I need,
or I shall be full, and deny thee,
and say, “Who is the Lord?”
or I shall be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we say, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Feed me with the food that is needful for me, only as much as I need. Else we may become ungrateful and think we have no need of God.

In II Corinthians Paul advocates the ideals of self-sufficiency, having enough, and fair balance. People should have sufficient wealth not only to satisfy their own needs but also to share the excess with others, who are in turn obliged to share also. Sufficient wealth, so that we can join thousands of Presbyterians today in an offering dedicated to peacemaking and global witness.

When we gather at the Communion Table it is meaningful to know that we are sharing in a sacrament which has been observed somewhere every single day for nearly 2000 years. Nowhere are we in touch with so much history as we are in the church. On this World Communion Sunday we join hands and hearts with people throughout the world. Rich and poor and in between. Black and white. Red and yellow and brown. Male and female. Young and old.

But more than that. Here we are in touch with eternity, with the living bread, the source of abiding peace—Jesus Christ. And we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses—the communion of saints, God’s people living beyond time and space. Let us take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.

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