

Proverbs 30:5-9
Mark 10:17-27

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 10, 2021

A Prayer for Two Things

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson today constitutes the only prayer in the Book of Proverbs. The words are the words of Agur, whose identity is unknown and whose name occurs nowhere else in scripture. Agur prays for two things. Listen to these words from Proverbs 30:7-9...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson we hear that contrary to childlike trust, a rich young man relies on his self-righteousness to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him that his riches are a stumbling block. Listen to these words from Mark 10:17-27...

Sermon

Do you remember the story of the poor farmer who 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.”

To be sure, the message of Mark is 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 hear that God can do what seems impossible. And this graceful note can be sounded: we can never earn enough—or give away enough—to gain eternal life. For it is impossible for us to “earn” salvation. But what is impossible for us turns out to be God’s gift to each of us.

Let me say here that this sermon is not an attack on the rich. There’s enough of that by already today, with the constant reference to them paying their fair share of taxes. However, in the United States the top 1% pay over 40% of all federal taxes; the top 5% pay over 60%. And 47% pay no taxes at all. Without the wealthy, our taxes would go up. They create jobs and are a key to a healthy economy. I believe fostering class envy and class warfare is badly mistaken. I think bashing corporations 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 here is not how much money we make or how much we pay in taxes, 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, do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God?

John Calvin had nothing against people of means. He said that good financial fortune is often a benefit that comes by God’s grace. But if those so blessed are not generous in return, they turn their benefits into curses in God’s eyes. “Of whom much is given, much is expected.”

The wise man of our scripture in Proverbs 30 deals with poverty and riches, but not before he has praised the truth of God's word. Then in a simple prayer in verse seven 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 would 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."

It reminds me of the 1940 Christmas movie, "Shop Around the Corner," set in Budapest and starring Jimmy Stewart, Margaret Sullivan, and Frank Morgan. In it, Jimmy Stewart's character, Krälik, asks another employee, Pirovitch, about the cost of living for a married couple.

Kralik : Suppose a fellow gets an apartment with three rooms. Dining room, bedroom, living room.

Pirovitch : What do you need three rooms for? You *live* in the bedroom.

Kralik : Where do you eat?

Pirovitch : In the kitchen. You get a nice big kitchen.

Kralik : Where do you entertain?

Pirovitch : Entertain? What are you, an ambassador? Who do you want to entertain?

To be sure, it seems quite natural to pray for freedom from poverty, but 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 today that can be enormous. At Anderson University tuition and fees are \$29,230 a year. At Presbyterian College in Clinton, \$39,400 a year. At Furman University in Greenville, \$50,844. 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.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, a timely tale of debauchery, lost love, and regret. 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. 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 people. Fitzgerald wrote:

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.
(*The Great Gatsby*)

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)

“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. There’s nothing glorified in being dependent upon parents or government for one’s financial survival. Surely, those who stand before a mountain of debt, understand the significance of this ancient prayer: “Deliver me from poverty.”

I think too, this prayer is relevant to churches—including Midway. We have no desire to be a wealthy church, and there’s no indication that we are headed in that direction. But there is a reasonable concern that without membership growth and faithful stewardship, we could become a poor church. And that is no fun at all.

We can fall short by creating a situation where we have nothing left to offer God. We can get so much in debt, have such a large home mortgage, buy such an expensive car, spend so much on entertainment, that there is nothing left with which to glorify God. We can do the same thing with our time and energy. We can overextend ourselves and then say it is not our fault that we have nothing left for family, friends, church, or for whatever else to which God directs us.

Eugene Grimm has a book titled, “Generous People.” One of his points is that the healthy church focuses less on the church’s needs and more on the member’s need to give. Grimm believes that by preaching the Word, the church is doing members a favor. By convincing members to be generous, we are actually enhancing people’s lives. If money, or

things, or status, become of such importance that they capture our heart's desire and shape who we are, we are in danger spiritual decay and death.

Therefore, my friends, I need to declare that God calls us to be gracious and generous with what has been entrusted to us. To be true to scripture and our theological tradition. Our *Book of Order* declares that one of the great themes of the Reformed tradition is,

A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God's creation. (F-2.05)

And after all,

God loves a cheerful giver. (II Cor. 9:7b)

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