

wealth.compassion

A sermon based on Mark 10:17-34

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A minister returned home from church one Sunday and his wife, unable to attend that morning, asked him what he had preached about. "I preached that the rich should give to the poor," he replied. "And how did it go?" she asked. "About half and half," he said, "I was able to convince the poor that it was a good idea."

The sermon this morning is about wealth, and I suspect you'll like it and find it convincing because when I looked at the statistics of giving to our church I discovered that many of us are poor. I'm not from Missouri, but I'm from a place much like it, and I just assume that Christians tithe their income. It's a kind and hopeful assumption, but if true, it means that eighty-eight of our households are living below the poverty line! It also means that only eight households in our church earn more than \$60,000!

I'm being coy, of course, and I shouldn't feign surprise because this is not a new insight for me. I stumbled upon it a number of years ago, but a fellow member explained to me that the members of this church give a lot of money elsewhere! I assume that this is still true. I hope so, for it relieves me of the burden of worrying about your material wealth, and it also solves the puzzle of how all those cars in the parking lot get paid for!

Fortunately, I don't know what any of you earn, and I don't know what any of you give to OMC or elsewhere, which allows me to continue assuming that you tithe your income and that many charitable institutions other than our church are the beneficiaries of your tithe. That being the case, the purpose of my sermon this morning is to encourage you to give more than a tithe.

Jesus and a Wealth.com Guy

That is certainly the intent of our gospel reading this morning. Jesus was on his way somewhere when he was approached by a wealth-dot-com guy with a large load of company stock options in his investment portfolio. He's a guy who moved from Apple Computers to Microsoft at just the right time, and not only is his diversified stock portfolio well-managed, he sold his Nortel and Mitel stocks a month ago! Just on his way home from his beach condo in an oversized SUV, the wealth-dot-com guy stopped and asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17)

Well, you know the story, and the drama group made it quite vivid for us. There's a little bit of kibbitzing and swapping of definitions, whereupon Jesus points the man to the traditional commandments. A rather simple answer, perhaps too simple! Nowadays a wealth-dot-com guy wouldn't know what Jesus was talking about—Commandments?—but in those days dot-com people received a well-rounded education, and the wealth-dot-com guy in Jesus' story recognized the answer as the same that any other rabbi would have given. A blinding glimpse of the obvious was not what he had in mind, however!

The answer was easy, too easy, perhaps, so he asked Jesus, "Which commandments?" To which Jesus replied with four prohibitions and two positive commands, all but one of them from the Ten Commandments. Don't do this, don't do that, don't do the other thing, and love your neighbour. Relieved, the man answered, "Teacher, I have kept all (of) these since my youth." (Mark 10:20) And Jesus, looking at him with compassion, said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, (and) follow me." (10:21) When the man heard this, the gospel tells us, "he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (10:22)

The exchange between this fellow and Jesus sent a chill through the disciples, and they were not at all comforted when Jesus looked around at them and said, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23) When their look of perplexity continued, he said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (10:24-25)

The disciples wondered where they figured in this gospel equation, and Peter, trying, perhaps, to position himself in a favourable light, said, "We...left everything and followed you." (Mark 10:28) And Jesus assured them that this would not be forgotten in the eternal reckoning of things. (10:29-30)

The Wealth.com Story Is Not About Wealth!?!

Fortunately, there are many New Testament commentators who assure us that this passage about wealth is not about wealth. There is a way to sell off your gospel shares before they go the same way as Nortel! Several escape routes have been mapped out in case we be tempted to take this story seriously and waste all our wealth on the poor!

Escape Route #1: This story is not about wealth; it's about thinking you can earn eternal life in the same way as you earn wealth. The wealth-dot-com guy's character flaw is revealed in his first question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17) His fixation on earning his way is revealed in his strict following of the commandments and his sincerity in believing he had fulfilled their intent. He takes his obligations seriously. And indeed, Jesus later tells the disciples that for mortals eternal life is impossible; only God can accomplish it. (10:27)

Well, it's a convincing argument, especially for Protestants who have supped for centuries at the trough of cheap grace, but if wealth were not the issue here, why would Jesus say—three times—that it's really hard for wealth to squeeze into the kingdom of God? (Mark 10:23-25) I'm afraid that if we try to take this escape route with all our possessions in tow, we'll get stuck in the escape tunnel!

Escape Route #2: Some New Testament commentators admit that this gospel story is about wealth, but it's not really as hard for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God as Jesus seems to make it out to be. And a lot of it has to do with our understanding of hyperbole. Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25), and it's that "camel thing" that trips us up.

Some commentators have pointed out that there was a tiny gate in the Jerusalem wall called the Needle's Eye, a gate too small for loaded camels to pass through unless they were first divested of their burden, got down on their knees, and tried really hard!

Well, this explanation makes Jesus' words more user-friendly, and seems to allow for the possibility that the divestment of your investments need be only temporary, but other commentators tell us that there never was any such gate in Jerusalem. The crusaders, centuries later, built something like it—slits about four feet tall and six inches wide through which to shoot arrows—but in Jesus' day, they say, there was no such gate. And even if there was, I don't see where it takes much away from the difficulty of Jesus' command. It's still hard, as hard—to use modern hyperbole—as hard as driving a fully-loaded SUV through a basketball hoop!

Yet other commentators—they're a tenacious and determined bunch, these commentators—point out that in the Greek language the word for “camel” and the word for “rope” sound alike, and what Jesus may have said is that it's easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. I have enough trouble getting thin and unfrayed thread through the eye of a needle, so I don't think I'd have any more luck with a rope! The intent of this interpretation is to soften Jesus' words, but I don't think it's successful. Furthermore, there may be a hint of divine comedy in the fact that for many of us our eyesight grows worse as our wealth increases!

The sophistry inspired by Jesus' camel-and-needle illustration brings no credit to our schools of higher learning, I'm afraid, and only invites satire, like the suggestion that a research grant be given to scientists to find a way to manipulate DNA in such a way as to produce very, very small camels. Another research institute, satirists tell us, was encouraged to find a way of liquefying camels and passing the liquid camel through the needle's eye. Attempts to reconstitute the camel subsequent to its passage, however, have been negative to date ... and invite further research.

Sometimes I find it hard to tell the difference between satire and sincere commentary. One approach I came across characterized the wealthy man in Jesus' story as the underdog, appealing to his sincerity and humility; after all, when he came to Jesus he knelt before him. (Mark 10:17) Other than the one thing that he lacked, he could have been an ideal poster boy for the kingdom of God. Far from being a moral coward, who lacked commitment, he was a courageous fellow, and Jesus, Mark tells us, looked upon him and “loved” him (Mark 10:21), suggesting that Jesus looked with considerable favour upon him. Maybe. It also may have been a look of pity for a fellow who couldn't find his way out of a moral forest even if he had a global positioning device taped to his forehead!

Our reading from the Old Testament prophet, Amos, is a sample of the prophetic tradition that shaped Jesus' mind and teaching, and at least one of the points that Amos makes is that wealth and stewardship are not so much about us, and our comfort and investments, as it is about the need of our neighbours, and I mean neighbours in its most inclusive, Jesus-inspired sense. Amos tells us that we “push aside the needy in the gate.” (Amos 5:12). “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate...” (5:15) If you're going to hang around the city gate, spend a little less time worrying about the size of the gate and whether it will accommodate a camel, and a little more time on the injustice evident around the gate!

Escape Route #3: Some commentators admit that this gospel story is about wealth, but that it was not meant to be universalized. Jesus' command to the wealth-dot-com guy was a unique word, intended only for him! Preachers err when they use this story to attack those with wealth. If this story has a universal message, it has to do with what we are most attached to in this life. For some that is money; for many others it is something else.

Well, I don't know. There are problems with this notion, not the least of which is why those who gathered together the gospel stories bothered to include it? If it has no relevance to anyone but the man in the story, why bother including it in a body of Christian instruction?

The story was included in the New Testament canon, however, as was the story of Zacchaeus, who didn't even have to be asked to share his wealth with the poor. He offered, saying "Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." (Luke 19:8) Or what about the story of the merchant who, "on finding one pearl of great value, ...went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:46) Is this a story relevant only to jewellers? Similarly, the story of the person who found a "treasure hidden in a field," who "in his joy...goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." (Matthew 13:44) Is this story relevant only to farmers?

The same people who don't want to universalize Jesus' teaching on wealth are only too eager to universalize Jesus' command to Nicodemus—to be born again! I suspect that these two New Testament encounters are more related than we may think! Besides, if Jesus' first disciples didn't hear this command of Jesus as applying to them, then why does it bother them? (Mark 10:24 & 26)

Peter, Andrew, James and John were seemingly unaware that this impulse—to leave the one thing for another that is infinitely more compelling—was not a universal gospel impulse, for they left behind their boats and their fishing nets to follow Jesus. Similarly Matthew, who walked away from his tax office to follow Jesus.

Then, of course, there are the explicit words of Jesus concerning wealth, remembered by his followers and left for us in the gospels, words that are very difficult to relativize, like his words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store 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 your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

We are quite ready to universalize the gospel message, except when it applies to economics. I could mention several other "escape routes" from this passage, for I'm ashamed to say that there's a whole history of such interpretations, all of them attempts to step around, deflect, or twist what Jesus says—some of them quite ingenious—but I don't want to give you any new ideas!

My Own Stewardship Diary

Mark's gospel tells us that the wealthy man was shocked by Jesus' command, and that he "went away grieving". (Mark 10:22) And I confess to a little shock myself, though I would rather read the gospel as is and be shocked by it than lessen the shock by weaseling out of the story's inferences.

If I were to share parts of my own stewardship diary with you, I can't, in all truth, remember being taught about a Christian approach to wealth in my home. There really wasn't that much wealth to worry about. My parents barely made it through the Great Depression alive, and though I was born long after the Depression, their hard-learned lessons were not lost on me. I spent my initial years with my parents on marginal farm land, sufficiently marginal that about 40 years ago the Saskatchewan government mercifully returned it to the scrub pine forest from whence it came. We had no electricity; no running water; no central heating; no double-glazed windows; no heat pumps—only water pumps; and no electives in the one-room school house we attended. Sometimes we didn't even have a teacher!

Please don't misunderstand me. My point is not to convince you of how poor I was. It's quite the opposite! My background continues to convince me how incredibly wealthy I am! I won't pretend to be wealthier than I am. Putting kids through school is a costly venture, as some of you know. Not all of our kids get scholarships. Not all of us have indexed pensions. Not all of us have stock options. Not all of us can afford to buy RRSPs. Many of us don't stand to inherit much, but one thing I did inherit was a naivete that never fails to inspire my astonishment at the vast sums of money people are willing to pay for unnecessary things! Some of you still have this instinct, and apply it diligently to any costs a church might be tempted to incur, but few of us apply it any more to our homes, vacations and the like.

I can forgive my parents for not spending a lot of time worrying about giving their wealth away; there was none to give! I wasn't taught to give money away and it was with some surprise, then, that I received a letter from my church, shortly after being baptized at the age of fourteen, asking for seventeen dollars as my share of the church budget. I didn't have a job and I didn't receive an allowance, so I wasn't sure where I was going to get the money!

That was my introduction to the responsibilities of church membership. My introduction to tithing came from a book. It was the autobiography of R.G. LeTourneau (*Mover of Men and Mountains*, 1960), a businessman of French Canadian origin, whose industry and inventiveness earned him enormous wealth. LeTourneau not only tithed, even in hard times, he decided somewhere along the way to give 90 percent of his wealth away. He also founded LeTourneau College, which among other things offered a degree in engineering and technology that interested me. In fact, I sent away for the college catalogue and was well on my way to becoming a techie—but then I met God! (Just kidding!)

LeTourneau's example was a lesson to me, a benchmark of generosity, and if nothing else it inspired me to commit myself to a tithe of my income while still a teenager, even though it often put me in arrears. I was reminded of LeTourneau's story and example recently when I came across a story of a Mennonite couple—the parents of one of our members, actually—who were moved by the same story and decided, decades ago, to

give away 90 percent of their income! (Calvin Redekop, "A quiet, steady witness," The Marketplace, September/October, 2000)

I don't know if God is trying to tell me something, or what, because I'm much further down the tithing scale, but I can tell you it was unsettling when a recent copy of the Mennonite Brethren Herald ("World Mennonite: A Glimpse into the Life of Larry Miller," October 6, 2000) shared the story of Larry Miller, the executive secretary of the Mennonite World Conference. I went to seminary with Larry. In fact, Dorothy and I, and Larry and Eleanor, were in the same small group. I knew Larry came from a wealthy family, but after seminary they moved to France and we moved to Manitoba, and I didn't know until now that Larry had given all of his wealth away while still in college!

Larry's father decided to give his children an early inheritance, and Larry, moved by New Testament teachings such as the one found in our gospel reading, says, "I believed I was one of those rich young rulers who should give his wealth away and follow Jesus." Asked if he has any regrets, Larry confesses that when he and Eleanor are trying to help their kids pay for their education he sometimes wishes that he had acted more like the grieving-but-rich young ruler, but he also says, "I couldn't do the work I'm doing today if I had wealth. It would make it harder for me to help amplify the voice of the South if I had big bank accounts."

Raise the Bar!

What is the lesson of our gospel story for us? I would be pleased if we could do three things in response to this story. Firstly, it would be helpful if we would admit wealth's importance to us. In days of yore a circuit-riding minister was out one afternoon when he came upon a man working in his field. "Fine day, isn't it?" the minister called out. It may be a fine day for you!" replied the man. "All you have to do is ride around on that horse thinking about God all day long, while I have to sweat here in this field and then walk home at the end of a long day! I don't think its right that you should have things so easy while I have to work so hard."

"On the contrary," answered the minister, "thinking about God is one of the most difficult things you can do! And to prove it, I'll give you this horse if you can think about God and nothing else for one minute."

"You're on," said the man, and immediately he sat down in silence. Scarcely thirty seconds had passed, however, when he looked up at the minister, and asked, "Does that include the saddle?" (Richard Fairchild)

The man in Jesus' story, unlike future generations of scholars, didn't try to weasel his way out of the facts. He was wealthy, and he bore the consequences of his wealth.

The second thing I'd like you to do in response to this gospel story is to remember it. Don't dismiss it as too preposterous. Let it stew in your brain. Let it pop into your mind when you buy an unnecessary item or indulge in luxury. Let the Holy Spirit use it when you calculate the extent of your own generosity.

My father had difficulty, not just with threading a needle, but with getting a car between two gateposts. In their later years my parents bought a little, second-hand house trailer, and whenever they returned home, my dad, his farming background notwithstanding, could not back up the trailer in a straight line! Both of the gate posts and the house trailer showed vivid signs of his attempts. Fortunately, my parents lived on a corner lot, and so

my dad removed a portion of the fence in front of the house and drove the car and trailer across the front lawn in order to get it where he wanted it!

Perhaps our gospel story does its best work when it acts as one of the guideposts that guide our own level of generosity. On the one side is the guidepost of the tithe, and on the other side the guidepost of giving our all! Or, perhaps on one side is our wealth, and on the other side is compassion—the same spiritual impulse that compels us to spend hours of work on Ten Thousand Villages—and it would be fruitful to let the tension between the two be a creative tension.

The third thing I'd like you to do in response to this gospel story is to raise the bar of your own generosity. Just as a high jumper is not content with his or her last level of achievement, each time raising the bar just a little higher, so God may be asking you to give a little bit more, rather than congratulating yourself!

A wealthy man told his friends that when he was a boy he once heard a missionary give a stirring talk on missions. "I was so moved," he said, "that when the offering came around I gave everything I had in my pockets. Since then," he said, "God has blessed me with unimaginable riches. I attribute my present wealth to the fact that, when I was that little boy, I gave all I had to the Lord." He sat down amidst an awed silence of admiration, broken a moment later when a feisty old woman up front got up, turned to face the tycoon, and said, "Brother, I dare you to do it again!"

Our gospel story leaves little room for self-congratulation, but it does inspire us to try harder. Don't misunderstand me. This is not about fund-raising. I don't care where you give your wealth. Give it to any registered charity! Give it to telephone solicitors! Give it to the church down the street! I don't care. This is not about fund-raising. This is about wealth and health—material wealth, spiritual health, and service to the kingdom of God.

May God's Holy and generous Spirit help us as we examine our blessings, and return a portion of it to the One who first gave it to us.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.