

“Put Your Money...” a sermon by the Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church October 15, 2006

Text: Mark 10:17-31 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.”’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and 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, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

PERHAPS SOME OF YOU saw a front-page spread in Time magazine about a month ago. The headline was “Does God Want You to Be Rich?” It was an expose, of sorts, of the trend in some evangelical mega-churches to preach what has been called “Prosperity Gospel,” the ‘Name It and Claim It’ Christianity where God’s call to abundance trumps God’s call to sacrifice.

The article mentioned evangelist Joel Osteen, seen by millions on television as “the smiling preacher.” Osteen’s Lakewood Community Church in Houston, has some 30,000 folks attending every week. And he is a best-selling author of multiple treatises on abundance. In fact, earlier this year, the news was full of the fact that, following the enormous success of his book *Your Best Life Now*, this television evangelist has signed a book deal that is potentially one of the richest for a nonfiction book and could bring Osteen more than \$10 million.

Here is yet another entry in the long list of American contributions to the Prosperity Gospel: just improve your attitude, keep your chin up, look for your opportunities, and God’s blessings will rain down on you. Norman Vincent Peale said it 50 years ago and Bruce Wilkinson said it with *The Prayer of Jabez* a few years back.

But – did Jesus say it?

"Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" The earnest seeker, wanting to sign and seal his entry into heaven, is able to follow all the Ten Commandments, but he cannot follow Jesus. He cannot give up his wealth.

For our purposes today, I propose that we substitute the word Peaceful or Peaceable for the word Eternal. "Master, what must I do to gain a peaceful life, a peaceable world?" That not only makes the reading more specific to our own month devoted to Peace, it makes it more relevant to me, personally. Eternal life is not something I can control, but a life closely aligned with Jesus, totally dependent on God, that is a challenge I can consider. Salvation is after death; peace is "God's kin-dom come, on earth as it is in heaven."

So how does this story relate to peace? Well, first, money is seductive. A third-grade teacher asked her class: "Suppose you had \$.99 and your friend had \$99. What would be the difference?" And one little girl replied, "The dismal point." More to the point, Harvard Medical School psychologist Steven Berglas has found that individuals who "suffer" from success have arrogance and a sense of aloneness. Insider trader Dennis Levine, after his conviction, was asked by his wife why he needed the money. Levine says that when his income was \$100,000, he hungered for \$200,000, and when he was making \$1 million, he hungered for \$3 million. He didn't know why. Berglas points out that people who find that \$200,000 did not make them happy, never asked themselves why they thought \$300,000 would make them happy. Asked to prescribe a cure for the success syndrome, Berglas said, "What's missing in these people (Ivan Boesky, Michael Milken, Leona Helmsley) is deep commitment or religious activity that goes far beyond just writing a check to a charity."

It's not the money, it's the commitment.

The Rev. Will Campbell is a Baptist prophet from North Carolina. A few years ago he was invited to preach at the prestigious Riverside Church in New York City, the one Maureen visited last month. That church has long been noted for its activist preachers and liberal, politically correct agenda. Will Campbell was asked to preach on the subject of Riverside Church and Race Relations in America. Campbell took for his text the same one we are hearing today, the story of the rich ruler. "What can Riverside Church do to help race relations?" he began. "What can this church do to relate to its next-door neighbors in Harlem? Nothing," said Campbell, "nothing...unless you sell your big building and give it to the poor. Let's go out on the street and see what you can get for this big building." The host preacher and congregation were not amused.

Wealth is seductive. It is desire's ultimate goal, the possession of which would finally allow the subject to accede to self-sufficiency.

But if there is anything Jesus is against, it is self sufficiency. Each of us is and ought to be dependent on God and God alone. And through community, each of us is meant to be dependent on one another, to work together, unity within our diversity. It is too easy for money to become an end in itself.

I don't think Jesus was saying to us "Have no money. Be poor and suffer." I believe we really are meant to have shelter and food and clothing, to get educated and travel and enjoy beauty and art and music and books. We are meant to have enough.

The problem was not that rich man in the Gospel possessed wealth, it was that the wealth possessed the rich man. Instead of using his wealth as a tool, he had allowed it to become an integral part of who he was, a major part of what defined him. And it kept him from putting full faith and trust in God alone, it kept him from following Jesus.

The bondage we have to money is a sign of our bondage to the Powers of the World. You can't bring that into the Kin-dom of God. You have to choose one or the other, that's just the way it is. Whew, talk about puttin' the heat on. No wonder the rich young man was sad.

The economic aspect of Jesus' teaching is ignored at the church's peril. With Jesus' teaching in mind, we renounce the so-called 'prosperity gospel' in all of its forms. This is nothing more than middle-class consumerism with Bible verses. The 'prosperity gospel' is a religious multi-level marketing scheme used in the churches to make the few at the top wealthy, at the expense of the masses under them

In today's Gospel, No-Longer-Gentle-Jesus-Meek-and-Mild reveals what theologians have long noted: Jesus had a preference for people who are poor. Like the prophets before him—Jesus was very clear in his disdain for people whose riches were taken from others, whose lifestyles were lived because others had no chance for a good life, whose own lack of concern for people who were poor was not anything they ever noticed about themselves, who thought of themselves as righteous because of their shallow notions of spirituality or discipleship.

Does attachment to money stand in the way of peace? One could argue that greed and power were the major motivators of our misguided and tragic war in Iraq, and land and power stand between Palestine and Israel, and money allows the genocide of the poverty stricken in the Sudan. Corporate malfeasance is the result of corporate greed, racial riots and homelessness come down to economic injustice. Only a week before the Hunger CROP walk, it is noteworthy that the main cause of hunger is not a lack of food. It is not laziness. It is not overpopulation. It is not even lack of modern agricultural methods the main cause of hunger is political. In North Korea, untold millions starve because of the government's unwillingness to give up on failed economic policies. In Sudan, millions are threatened with starvation because in the ongoing military conflict, the government restricts and even intercepts the flow of emergency relief.

There is hope. There have been those who actually took Jesus' words literally, selling everything and giving it to the poor, and truly experiencing it as a liberation, as Good News!

800 years ago, in the small Italian city of Assisi there was a rich young man. He was handsome, popular, the life and soul of every party, the instigator of at least half the mischief that went on around the place! But Francesco di Bernardone gave all of that up and became St. Francis.

In the 1970's, Millard and Linda Fuller, made millions But as the business prospered, the Fullers' marriage suffered. Their "soul-searching" led to reconciliation with each other and to a renewal of their Christian commitment. Fuller and her husband then took a drastic step: they decided to sell all of their possessions, give the money to the poor and begin searching for a new focus for their lives. The result was Habitat for Humanity.

Saturday's paper held news of the Nobel Prize for Muhammed Yunus, Bangladesh's Banker to the Poor, He pioneered the idea of micro credit. He took his own money and began making many tiny loans without collateral loans, loans which served to create economic and social development from below. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind for the rich man. Perhaps this is the Gospel that our President should have read, before plunging into Iraq.

And Rabbi Michael Lerner has the idea that peace in our world depends on affordable health care, an education system that teaches values of love and caring, better stewardship of the environmen. He proposes a "global Marshall Plan" -- a U.S. led development effort that would use 5 percent of America's gross domestic product each year for 20 consecutive years, to be joined by countries in the European Union. He believes that, like the Women's movement and the Civil Rights movement of the past, a Spiritual Progressive movement can transform America and the world.

Here is the point that I think the Prosperity Gospel people forget: that God's riches and blessings are given to us, not so we can hoard them and use them to construct a citadel of pleasure around us, but so we can use them for God's good glory. When God blesses us with good things, God then wants us to bless others, to share our wealth, to reach out and give back what has been given to us.

He looked at the rich man and saw that possessions were standing in between the man and God. He looked at the disciples and saw that competition, resentment, a need for a guarantee, were keeping them from full faith and trust. When he looks at you, what does he see that keeps you from full surrender to the will and care of God?

Jesus loved the rich man, Jesus let him know that he only lacked one thing: the humility to come and follow Jesus. Put your money where your -- trust is. Where you love is. Put yourself into God's hands. This is the way of peace. For mortals it seems impossible, but for God nothing is impossible.

AMEN