



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Preached by Rev. Bruce Sanguin

Mark 10: 17-31

October 11, 2009

19th Sunday after Pentecost

“Money and the Kin(g)dom of God”

Well, it’s a strange juxtaposition of sacred text and time of year. You might expect something like this from Jesus – confronting us with the conundrum of money on Thanksgiving weekend. I admit, I could have simply chosen a different reading, perhaps a Psalm encouraging us be grateful at all times. Then, we could have all gone home after church and enjoyed the turkey and the Alsace Riesling – and God knows we need to be able to do this in an uncomplicated way. Our lives are complicated enough without having to think more deeply about money on Thanksgiving weekend. But for whatever perverse reasons, I became so fascinated by the Scripture reading before us this morning that I’m going with it. My greatest hope is that you will indeed enjoy your pumpkin pie this evening, and perhaps afterwards this sermon may be part of a relaxed post-dinner conversation.

The Scripture this morning is a poignant story. The featured character is a very sincere, good man, who has kept all the commandments, observed the rituals he was supposed to keep, played it by the book. He’s hoping this all adds up to “inheriting eternal life”. He’s concerned about the state of his soul. Now we’re not quite sure what exactly he meant by eternal life, but let’s assume that he simply meant

“heaven” in the very traditional sense of the term. He wanted to know that he was going to get into heaven after he died, and that whatever saints were awaiting his soul at the pearly gates would deem him worthy of entrance. He actually kneels before Jesus – a remarkable gesture of humility given that he’s rich and Jesus is a peasant.

Jesus looks upon the wealthy man and loves him. This is one of only two places in Mark’s gospel where the word love appears! He loved this man. Then he tells him that he lacks only one thing. He needs to go and sell all his possessions and give them to the poor and follow Jesus. Then he will have treasure stored up in heaven and his name written into the heavenly rolls.

Well, this shocked the poor man, and he went away grieving. He knew that this was beyond his power to do. At the outset, we can draw a couple of preliminary conclusions:

1. You can’t disconnect money and spirituality. They are inextricably linked. Jesus actually has more to say about money than he does about heaven or love or anything else for that matter. Our relationship with money is a central dimension of our spiritual life.

2. The issue of how we use our money matters in the Christian life to Jesus. We don't know if Jesus was more concerned with the man being able to detach from this wealth – go and sell it – or that it be redistributed to the poor. Let's assume he's concerned about both. What we do with it and don't do with it reveals the state of our soul.

My wife Ann and I are taking in a number of films at the Vancouver Film Festival, as we do most years. One of them was a beautiful documentary called *This Way of Life*. The film tracks the life of a New Zealand family over four years. A mom and dad, Peter and Colleen, with their six young children live in what we would call a state of poverty. Yet they have all the food they need – he hunts, he takes the odd job when the family needs it. They suffer hardship, lose their “home”, and are forced to squat in a tent for a season or two. But the family exudes happiness, love, and most importantly soul. You sense that this family has a soul – which they have something that the moneyed culture somehow lost. At one point, the father smiles and says, “Everybody asks me how I make a living. I don't. I make a life. And hopefully what I do for money and making a life are connected”.

As I watched the film, I had a sense that they enjoyed a freedom that we, the audience, longed for. This freedom was somehow associated, not with having money, but being *outside* of the money system. Granted, it's easy to romanticize the situation. As Elizabeth Ward wondered in Bible study this

week, they took their kids to school and to church, but were they able to contribute to the taxes that paid for the school system, or the operating budget of the church? The film wasn't clear on the point. I'm not saying that this was what this couple was doing. But everybody selling all their possessions and living off of everybody else's money is no solution in today's day and age. But still, it raises the question for me: is there no way to be in this money system without compromising our soul and our freedom, our spiritual life, and our planetary health?

The wealthy man in the reading grieves and walks away from Jesus when he is invited to sell everything and follow Jesus. Jesus looks at him with love and says: “How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the Kin(g)dom of God”.

Let's say you've come a certain distance on this money thing. You get to a point in life where, rather than working for money, you want your money working for you. You realize that you want to give more of it to charities – hopefully including the church! Perhaps you're Christian, and now you get it that our wealth is meant to be used to build the kind of world that Jesus intended. You join that demographic of people that is giving 5% of their wealth away – and you are doing it joyfully. Congratulations! You are among an elite group of North Americans. You've imbued your money with soul, and it's working for God! You've read the research showing that the correlation between

money and happiness only holds true up a level just above the poverty line. After that, factors other than money are way more important – quality of relationships, love of your work, and sense of purpose for example. Good on you. You are not far from the Kingdom of God, as Jesus would have put it.

But there's another step, and it has to do with the money system that you had absolutely nothing to do with creating. Most of us here, in fact, were born into it. Even those of us who alive when it started, had no influence in setting it up. But now we all participate in it. Now, we're not talking about your private relationship with money. What do I mean by "the money system"?

It's a global, economic system associated with an ideology called neo-liberalism, which is based in an assumption that an unregulated market will bring the most good for the most people. This system emerged post WW2 at Bretton Woods in 1944. The leaders of the world got together to figure out how to finance the rebuilding of Europe after being devastated by war and how to make sure that the world economy never again collapsed like it did during the Great Depression. These were both noble goals, set out by people of noble intentions, out of which the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were born. Both of these institutions became centered in and controlled by the United States.

Unfortunately, both institutions privileged the Northern, developed nations at the expense of the Southern, developing nations. Loans are given out to the poor nations. In exchange, developing nations agree to sell off any nationalized industries – railways, power generation plants, and even agricultural land. They are required to open themselves up to foreign control of these industries – usually in the form of multinational corporations. The agreements, such as those developed by the World Trade Organization, lower environmental regulations, corporate taxes, wages, and often end up displacing many indigenous peoples and creating health problems because of the low environmental regulations. Some corporations act responsibly, but over the years most have not. It created what Joseph Stiglitz, former President of the World Bank, calls the "curse of natural resources." Those developing nations with the most abundant natural resources, and who therefore should actually be prospering because of increased trade, actually show the highest incidence of illness and poverty.

Professor Stiglitz – former President of the World Bank – was forced out of his job because he blew the whistle on this system. His voice is moderate. He has nothing against the market system. It has the potential to help poor, developing nations, but he became convinced that the market system needed to be regulated by the state, and that the wealthy nations needed to rebalance their policy to make it easier on these nations to

flourish. The loans given to these nations have resulted in massive debt, resulting in an intransigent cycle of repayment and entrenched poverty. End of history lesson.

We watched another documentary featuring Joseph Stiglitz called *Around the World with Joseph Stiglitz*. This one made the history lesson I just gave a human face. He took us to Ecuador to meet peasants living and dying with the aftermath of Texaco's oil drilling. One of the terms of their agreement was that they could not be held responsible for the ecological mess they've left. We met subsistence farmers in India, who are selling their kidneys because the market price for their crops means they will lose money when they sell. They now are savvy enough to know that these market prices are intentionally kept low by the billions of dollars of subsidies given to farmers in the U.S. and Europe – the very countries who are benefiting from so-called “free trade”.

Here's what makes it hard to enter the Kin(g)dom of God with this money system in place. If you have a pension plan, hold RRSP's or a mortgage with a chartered bank, or have simply socked your money away in boring old GIC's, you are supporting this system. You might not *know* that you are supporting this system, you might not *want* to know that you are supporting this system, but you are. As I am.

Most of us, who are able, buy a GIC or take out a mortgage and repay

the loan without having any idea where or how our banks are investing our money. Most of us just want a 10% return, no questions asked. This system is so pervasive, so global, that we are all inextricably enmeshed in it. If you are invested in Wall Street, the Nasdaq, or the TSX, as all fund managers, pension managers, and banks are, you are supporting this system. We are, in other words, the good man in the parable. Jesus loves us. But Jesus wants us to take a sobering, second look at our unconscious assumptions and relationship with money in our lives, both personally and systemically.

Please do not walk away from here saying that Bruce is anti-business or anti-market. I'm not. There are many corporations who act responsibly and are helping poor nations by creating jobs and wealth. But, when you listen to the moderate experts, who have been inside the system, and don't buy into the assumption that unrestricted free markets are implicitly good, by and large, you realize that the focus is not on helping the poor, but in maximizing shareholder (that's us) value. It turns out that this money system is a modified version of colonialism, in which there is a systemic bias in favour of the wealthy.

How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the Kin(g)dom of God.

Our local version of transferring wealth from the lower income people to the wealthy is our support of gambling in this province. When in opposition, the Liberals

fought against the NDP government receiving increased revenues from the gambling industry. “Their blood will be on the heads of the government that expanded gambling and of the MLA’s who supported it”, cried Kevin Krueger when he was in opposition. As the current minister of tourism, culture and the arts, he has lost his moral outrage. The Liberals have recently increased the weekly betting limit for online gambling from \$120.00 to \$9,999.00, so that, in the words of journalist Craig McInness, “the losers can lose a little faster.”

But here’s the rub. The revenue from gambling contributes more than a billion dollars a year to the provincial coffers. As a result, taxes are kept lower for you and for me. Neither political party is willing to risk removing this revenue from the coffers by placing greater restrictions on the gambling industry. They would need to hear from us that this is something we demand. Which means we’d have to be willing to pay more taxes. We’re all complicit in this money system, you see. “How hard it is for those who have money to enter the Kingdom of God. It’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25).

“Who, then, can be saved?”, the alarmed disciples ask.

Jesus’ responds, “For mortals it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” I take this to be a

statement of hope in God and compassion for the human condition. Jesus knows how high our security needs are, and for how much greed plays a part in our lives. Jesus knows that some things are just beyond us. And he loves us for it. More importantly, Jesus is directing us to seek our solution in God. He knows that with a little effort, like the rich man in the story, most of us can manage to take care of the basics: keep the commandments, be decent to our neighbours, and give some of our excess to charity. For the most part, we can just about manage being good people. But eventually, we’re all going to run up against something so intransigent, so deeply ingrained, and so insidious that it confronts us with our need, not simply to try harder, but to be transformed – to open ourselves to a higher mind, a more compassionate heart, and a wisdom that transcends our own.

Here, we call this the evolutionary heart and mind of Christ. As we gather for worship, deepen our prayer life, care for one another, reach out to the world and educate ourselves – participate in the life of Christ in other words – we can expect, by the grace of God, to grow in love, compassion, and in concern for justice and peace. This is how, for God, all things become possible – through willing souls open to the transforming power of the heart and mind of Christ. What’s impossible for us becomes possible in God.