

“KINGDOM ECONOMICS”

Mark 10:17-31

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

We were at a staff meeting working on goals for the coming year. We were also reflecting on the fact that no matter how much planning and strategizing we do, the Holy Spirit has a way of working in our lives and through our church to make things happen that we cannot anticipate a year, or even a few months earlier. For example, we invited Dr. Kent Millard to be our Myers Lecture speaker last fall. He told about the program that is energizing his congregation called, “Every Member in Ministry.” The acronym is T.I.M.E. (Together in Ministry Everyday.) Out of that weekend came the idea of 90 X 90. It started when one person, Juanita Taylor, made an appointment to see me and told me about her idea. We would focus on the hunger ministries of the Cleveland area, and attempt to get every member of Church of the Saviour to give 90 minutes of service to one of these agencies in 90 days, beginning in Lent, 2009. Then, when folks asked, “Why are you volunteering to help us in this way?” we could speak a good word about Jesus and about Church of the Saviour.

I thought it was a marvelous idea, and mentally started trying to figure out how I was going to add this project to my already overly full plate. Then Juanita said, “I just retired from thirty years of teaching, and I would be happy to head this project, if it’s all right with you.” All right with me? I was ecstatic! I was more than happy to be a cheerleader for this idea. I took it to the Charge Conference, which voted unanimously to make 90 X 90 one of our goals for 2009.

The program was fabulously successful. Last year we averaged 528 in Sunday worship. Over 400 people, 80% of our worshiping congregation, 4 out of 5 people who are here on a typical Sunday, completed 90 minutes of service in 90 days. Now make no mistake. I am under no illusion that 90 minutes of service in 3 months time is much of a commitment or much of a sacrifice. But it opened the eyes of many of us to some of the needs around us which we easily miss in the press of our everyday lives.

About mid-January, well after the budget had been adopted, the 90 X 90 program needed money for supplies. No one had thought about that. Fortunately, some money was found to implement the program. The same thing had happened the first year we did the Advent Festival. So at our goal-setting meeting, the staff decided that we needed to put some money in the budget in order to enable the Holy Spirit to do new and unexpected things, things that we don’t anticipate months and sometimes years ahead of time. We all agreed that was a good idea. Then someone said, “Our church’s Foundation also helps when the Spirit moves in new and fresh ways.” Indeed, while two-thirds of the income of the Foundation is designated for the expenses to help keep this marvelous building in good repair, one third of the income from our endowment is for program, seed money for projects and new ideas that we feel God has laid upon our hearts.

In a very real way, the generosity of those who have gone before us is helping the Holy Spirit to do its work in our congregation and our community today.

Money does not create spirituality. Nor does money make this world a better place. But money can enable us to do the things that God is calling us to do. It can also hinder our walk with God, as we see in today's Gospel lesson.

The story of the rich man and Jesus, often called "the story of the rich young ruler," is probably not new to many of us. Here is the person who has everything: he is athletic, good looking, obviously extremely wealthy, and a really nice guy besides. We don't know whether he inherited his money or was a successful entrepreneur, but he's got it all. Yet he still lacks the peace of mind and the inner contentment that all of us crave, for he comes to Jesus and says, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" What must I do to have the peace and joy that radiates from the presence of Jesus?

Jesus tells the young man to keep the commandments — for they show us how to live as God intends. The young man responds, not as I would have responded, by saying, "Thanks, Jesus, I'll try to do a better job this week," which is in essence what I say every week after we share our prayer time together. Instead he tells Jesus that he has kept all the commandments ever since he was a teenager! He tells Jesus he has done all the things that God expects him to do.

Jesus doesn't argue with him, but the Bible says Jesus looks at him, in utter amazement. I assume Jesus is utterly amazed that this guy could be so self-confident and utterly lacking in humility that he can see no weakness in his spiritual life whatsoever. Jesus sees someone who has it all, yet doesn't really have anything. For he has no insight into his own spiritual poverty. Jesus does not resent his wealth, his good looks, his arrogance, but the Bible says, Jesus loves him. How blessed are we when someone sees us for what we really are and loves us anyway! Jesus sees the inner man, not the clothes, the cars, the upper-middle class status symbols — and sees what this man really needs.

"*You lack one thing,*" says Jesus. "*What is it?*" this dude thinks to himself. "*I'll buy one!*" "*You lack one thing,*" repeats Jesus. "*Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me.*"

The Bible says the man was shocked! He figured he would buy whatever he lacked, and he'd have his spirituality taken care of. Never in ten worlds did he think he would have to give up something — more than something — everything — in order to find what his heart most desires.

And so the man hesitates. He cannot bring himself to do that. Sometimes we are most afraid of what we most need. It is one of the most perplexing mysteries of the human heart. Happiness, peace, healing and all the other elements of fullness of life can be right in front of us and we back away in fear. We know what we need to do to have a more blessed and satisfying life, but in the face of something immensely promising, we are too often like the young man in the story: we walk away. It is indeed hard to enter the Kingdom of God, but the source of difficulty comes not from Jesus, but from our own inner struggles.

The young man is stunned. Jesus says he will know fullness of life only by doing what seems utterly reckless and wildly preposterous. He will find happiness in being stripped of his possessions. He will move more deeply into life with God by letting go — by forever loosening his hold on what he owns.

He cannot bring himself to let go. So instead of accepting Jesus' invitation, the Bible

tells us that he “*went away grieving.*” The comment is telling because it suggests that the young man, after hearing Jesus’ advice, doesn’t weigh his options and then decide that returning to his wealth and possessions is the better choice. There is absolutely no indication that he has found what he is looking for in his wealth, for if he had, he would not have come to Jesus in the first place. He knows what Jesus says is true. He knows he is turning his back on the thing he most wants and needs. Fullness of life is standing right before him, but he can’t let go of a lesser good for the sake of a much greater good. So his life will continue to be less than it could be. As he watches the young man drive away in his shiny new sports car, Jesus comments to his disciples, “*How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!*”

The disciples are perplexed, for the common assumption of the time was that wealth and prosperity were a sign of God’s blessing. In traditional culture, the wealthy were typically celebrated as community benefactors, so it would appear that they were closer to God than the average person, not further away. The disciples are perplexed, but we are downright nervous, for by the rest of the world’s standards, the poorest person in our community is extremely wealthy. Some of us have the haunting feeling that Jesus may be talking about us!

Tony Campolo says that when he was a young man, he read the story of Jesus and the rich man and heard Jesus clearly demand that the young man sell all that he had and give it to the poor. He said the story caused him real problems.

Then Campolo went to seminary, studied higher criticism of Scripture, and his professors told him that this story did not mean what he first thought. Jesus did not mean to say, “Go, sell all you have and give it to the poor, then come follow me.” Jesus meant to say, “You need to be willing to give away all you have to the poor.” You don’t have to do it; you just need to be open to the possibility of doing it.

“Whew,” said Tony Campolo to himself, “It’s good to know what Jesus really meant by this. That makes it a lot easier.”

It took Tony Campolo a long time as a disciple, thinking more deeply and faithfully, to get back to his youthful dis-ease with the possibility **that Jesus really meant to say exactly what he said!**

Then Jesus observes that “*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!*” Now our anxiety goes off the chart! For we have been to the zoo and seen camels. Some of you have been to India or to Egypt and ridden camels. And we all know how big the eye of a needle is. I have a hard time threading a needle even with my reading glasses on! But wait a minute, Bible scholars tell us. You have to put this story in context. The “eye of a needle” refers to a narrow gate in the wall around Jerusalem, an opening that a real camel could get through with some difficulty. That makes us feel a little better.

But if we accept that explanation, I believe we’re missing the point! I believe Jesus is talking about real camels and real sewing needles. For the point is that salvation is impossible for any of us on our own. It is possible only through the miracle of God’s grace. God can save even the rich — that is, get the camel through the needles’ eye. God can save anyone. God desires to save everyone.

Now the disciples point out that unlike the rich young man, who cannot part with all his “stuff” in order to follow Jesus, they have left everything. But when they spend their spare time arguing about which one of them is the greatest, we have to ask, what do their lives lack? What

is the one thing that Jesus would ask of them? Then I have to ask, what does your life lack and what about mine? I believe Jesus is standing before each of us this morning and saying, “*You lack one thing.*” What is Jesus asking us to do today? Or to put it in the words of Zorba the Greek, “*You’ve got everything except one thing — madness. A man needs a little madness or else he never dare cut the ropes and be free.*” Isn’t that what Jesus is talking about? Isn’t that the key to the fullness of life that we all crave? Will we do what to the rest of the world seems utterly reckless and wildly preposterous for the sake of the Gospel? Will we let ourselves go — sell everything — in order to find what we are seeking?

The rich man goes away grieving, for he cannot bring himself to do what Jesus asks him to do. He goes away sad, but he does not go away empty-handed. Deep down, he knows that he has found what he is looking for — the knowledge that leads to eternal life. Although he walks away sad, he does not walk away without hope. He has heard Jesus say that “*For God all things are possible.*” Who knows what may happen after a few days of mulling over what Jesus has said? As long as we have life and breath, there is still time to turn and follow Jesus.

Kingdom economics are not like what we experience on Wall Street. Building up treasure in heaven does not operate on the same principles as building up treasure on earth. In the realm of the Spirit there are no bad investments. For there is hope for all of us.

As he watched the young man walk away, I believe that Jesus said a prayer for his return, and for ours. Even rich North Americans can be saved, **for with God all things are possible.** In the final analysis, the future is bright, not because of our wise investments and human generosity, but because of the relentless love of God that pursues us, chases us, and claims us as his very own.

Jesus awaits the return of the rich young man of ancient Galilee. Jesus awaits the return of those of us who live in Cleveland, Ohio. What one thing do our lives lack? Let us hear the words of Jesus as he speaks to us, and let us give our lives to him.

Prayer: Lord, as we hear Jesus speaking to the rich young man, help us to see ourselves in the story. Help us to ask what our lives lack. May we be willing to do whatever you ask in order to live the full, free life that you intend. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.