

Proper XVIII Year B: 8/9 September 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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“God has blessed each and every one of us with skill and reason and the means by which we are able to provide for our own needs and the needs of those less fortunate. In other words, for the greater good.”

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

James 2: 1-10, 14-17

Mark 7: 24-37

Psalm 125

“Each of us need to utilize those gifts for the greater good and that means helping the least among us. That means not hoarding, but sharing; not giving in to the fear of scarcity, but living generously from the heart of abundance.”

“Money, pardon my expression, is like manure. It’s not worth a thing unless it’s spread around, encouraging young things to grow.” The gospel of Dolly Levi as preached to Horace Vandergelder. More truthfully, words written by Thornton Wilder and taken from his book The Matchmaker, upon which the movie “Hello Dolly” is based. Indeed, money, at its best, can be used to enable others to better themselves, lift themselves up, and make something of themselves. At least it ought to, if Dolly’s words have any meaning. Reality, however, tells us a somewhat different story.

With wealth comes great responsibility. Not for multiplying one’s good fortune with more, but in enabling others to gain and grow into the fullness of who God created them to be. That’s what good ol’ Dolly was preaching. Over and over again, scripture too has something to say about money and wealth. Something that is very much counter-cultural in our present day and age.

The word money appears 200 times in scripture; wealth 115; rich 143, and poor 204. Seriously, scripture has a lot to say with regards to money. In our present age, money has become synonymous with success, influence, and power. All things we are taught to aspire toward: being financially independent. Yet the system in which our economy exists is biased,

skewed towards a particular demographic, thus rendering what we colloquially term “the American dream” unattainable for a larger portion of our population. In fact, it may actually be an illusion. Being independent – financial or otherwise – may be our north American ideal, but it’s not God’s intention. At least, not according to our sacred writings. Proverbs, for instance, sheds a little light on this matter.

One of the things you may not have noticed is there are several verses missing from our Proverbs reading. Those verses that were left out round off the wisdom being imparted. What we have read is an admonition to those for whom the system has allowed to prosper. Those omitted verses offer wise words to the poor as well: that they mustn’t live simply off the largesse of others. Scripture, you see, doesn’t just chide the wealthy, it also admonishes the poor. The bases for this is simple: God has blessed each and every one of us with skill and reason and the means by which we are able to provide for our own needs **and** the needs of those less fortunate. In other words, for the greater good. And there’s the rub!

It isn’t that money or wealth are inherently bad or even evil, as some would say. They’re not. It’s our *relationship* with money that can be problematic and lead to a way of life that exploits our neighbor and / or the environment. When wealth is gained by wronging, oppressing, or taking advantage of our neighbors – especially the poor – as well as the environment then, as Christians, we have a real problem. In such circumstances, we no longer trust in God, we trust in our selves, which is anathema to Jesus’s teaching. After all, it was Jesus who said “give to Caesar what Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s.”

Love your neighbor as yourself and do acts of mercy. That’s a straightforward summary of Jesus’s teaching that he embodied in his everyday life, and that we, as his followers, need to embrace. It’s so simple yet so, so hard to grasp. Jesus crossed so many social and economic barriers that following his example is often too much to ask. Or so we tell ourselves. Do you recall the rich young man asking Jesus what he must do to inherit the kin-dom of God? Jesus answers the man by telling him to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor after which he can come and follow Jesus. And what does the man do upon hearing this? He walked away. After all, can’t we simply worship Jesus once a week and call it good? To trust in God, to follow Jesus means to walk through life in a different way. So, **no**, it isn’t enough to just

worship Jesus; to just learn about Jesus. We are invited to **follow** Jesus, and that means going into uncomfortable, even taboo, places.

Escaping into Gentile territory for a respite from his Jewish people may have seemed like a good idea at the time. Gentiles had nothing to do with the Jews, so Jesus must've thought he would be unnoticed, that he'd catch a break from all the attention. It didn't happen.

Someone noticed and the next thing you know there's a Syrophenician woman asking healing from him. Not for her, mind you, but for her daughter. And the encounter doesn't go so well.

Jesus basically calls her a dog, an unclean animal. That his message and healing powers are for his own people. She, undeterred, pulls him up by the boot strap, and teaches him a thing or two: even dogs get table scraps. Lesson learned. Her daughter is healed. Not by the woman's faith (a word that doesn't appear in this reading), but by her *trust* that Jesus is who he says he is. The least in the land, those who are subjugated by Roman and outcast by the Jews, receive a blessing. God's grace is undeterred by social or religious precedent. Jesus is very much counter-cultural and a political and religious dissenter. That's who we're to trust and to follow.

Money is somewhat considered a taboo topic in church communities. Just like sexuality is. But as you heard in last week's sermon when I did broche the topic of sex and sensuality, these topics **need** to be address in church or we **risk** a hedonistic society determining how we define wealth and human sexuality and any number of moral and ethical questions. The wisdom of Proverbs allows us to enter the conversation knowing that we're **stewards** of God's creation, **caretakers** of our neighbors. It begs the question of us regarding our relationship with wealth and riches as well as of those whose position in life is not equal or equitable to those who have means and affluence. Undergirding it all is our understanding that our skill and reason are gifts of God that we need to use for the great good of all.

There is no walking away from Jesus if we are to be authentically Christian. There's no sugarcoating Jesus's message and admonition to care for one another and be stewards of all God's creation. It's folly to believe and trust that any economic systems is fair and just, otherwise scripture wouldn't have so much to say regarding one's finances. The onus is upon those whom the system favors while cautioning the least among us no to be too expectant. **All**

of us have been blessed with a variety of gifts. Each of us need to utilize those gifts for the greater good and that means helping the least among us. That means not hoarding, but sharing; not giving in to the fear of scarcity, but living generously from the heart of abundance.

There's a meme on social media that says "it's not that there isn't enough to feed the poor, it's there isn't enough to satisfy the rich." A rather crass way of putting it while shattering the illusion of the American Ideal. I prefer Dolly Levi's approach: Money is like manure. It's worthless unless it's spread around, encouraging things to grow. If we're to follow where Jesus leads and live into the summary of caring for one another and all creation, then it begs the question: How do you spread your blessings? How have you enabled others to grow? Great responsibility does come with wealth: responsibility to care for one another and be good stewards of creation. May we have the courage to trust in Jesus and follow in his way. And may Wisdom give each of us a generosity of spirit and a heart of compassion to be good stewards of all that God has entrusted us with.