

It is fortuitous that just as we are beginning our stewardship campaign, the gods of the lectionary arranged to have the story of the rich young ruler as our gospel reading for today. How convenient! Because, the story in today's gospel reading from Mark is very much about money. But the story is also about something deeper and much more important than money.

But first let's talk about money. I'll start off with the joke from last year. As one comedian says "Money talks, but what it mostly says to me is 'Bye-Bye!'" Actually, our just completed parish survey shows that we are a congregation where money mostly says "Hello!" We are a parish with a lot of money.

Given the economic downturn, you may not feel very wealthy. But, statistically speaking from a global perspective, every person here is in the tip-top percentile of those with wealth. The average American's wealth is a staggering 100 times the average Indian's or Indonesian's, for example. So even though you may be feeling the pinch right now, globally speaking, you have lots and lots of money.

Christie and I spent 5 months as missionaries in Haiti when we were first married working at a Haitian Episcopal Church. I'm not sure how much we actually gave or helped, but we were given this global perspective on wealth that has stuck with us ever since. Not that we aren't susceptible to the prevailing lure of materialism, but generally we remember that having just one indoor bathroom with hot and cold running water is in itself an unbelievable luxury.

In our Parish Survey, we also saw that even in comparison with the average Charlottesvillean, this parish has more than average wealth. We're locally wealthy as well as globally wealthy. Half of those responding to the survey reported incomes of over \$100,000 and almost a fifth of us have incomes of over \$200,000.

Talk of money makes many people uncomfortable, especially talk from the pulpit! I was certainly taught never to speak about money, religion or politics in polite company. Sorry, Mom and Dad! I'm guilty of 2 out of 3 right this second!

Why are we taught that money talk is taboo? Well, money has all kinds of power over people. This is why Jesus calls money an idol, a false god – Mammon. He says talk of money is talk of religion! Money represents status or security or who's in and who's out. More deeply and more insidiously, people actually equate wealth with worth. The more you have, the more worthy you are.

Some people are embarrassed by their so-called humble beginnings. Or some other people who now have money, boast about their so called humble beginnings to show that they are self-made, the epitome of the rags to riches American Dream. Either way, talk about money hits close to home.

In this morning's gospel, Jesus talks about money to the rich young man; his money talk hits close to home. Jesus' parents obviously never taught him to avoid the topic of money. He talks about it all the time. The Bible has more references to money or what to do with money than any other topic. So what about this time in this passage?

A rich man runs up and kneels before Jesus and asks, "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Jesus responds with the Law – the 10 commandments. Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, etc. The man says he's kept all the commandments from his youth. Jesus, knowing this is a brash and cocky answer, still looks at the man and loves him. That is a priceless scripture.

Then Jesus gets down to the inner heart, the inner life of the man. What is it that the man really holds dear? What is it that gives the man his worth and security? Like for so many of us, it's money – the idol Mammon.

The 1st commandment is you shall have no gods before Me. And the 2nd is you shall not make for yourself any idols. Although, the man may have technically and outwardly kept the other commandments, he is clearly guilty of breaking the first two.

Jesus, knowing the man's idolatrous heart, asks him to sell all he has and to give it to the poor. The man can't do it; his wealth is his worth and his life. So he goes away sorrowing.

It's said that money can't buy happiness. Taking that further, money and sorrowing often go together, and not just when money says "bye-bye." A study came out this past summer about the lives of people who won the British Lottery from 1994-2004. One review of the study is titled is "Winning The Lottery Is Bad For You." People who won the lottery tended to shorten their lives and engaged in self-destructive behavior.

Why? This is because money, like any other idol, can't satisfy the deepest desires of the heart. Only God can do that. That's why the Psalmist say, "*The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply.*"

One way to not go away sorrowing is to give your money away. The man was asked to give it all away; the usual biblical norm is 10%. It's called the tithe. It's a simple equation: if you have \$80,000 in income, you give away \$8,000. If you have a \$20,000 annual income, you give away \$2,000. \$200,000 means 20 grand out the door. It's an easy equation, even for an English major!

Giving money away not only helps those who are in need, it helps you. It helps remind you that you serve and worship God and not Mammon. And it helps you resist the materialistic culture which entices you to believe that Nordstrom's or your

store of choice will satisfy you and shield you from “sorrows.” It’s amazing the number of people who will actually confess that shopping makes them feel better.

But the object of your tithe is not yourself, of course, but the other. We also said in our Parish Survey that we want to reach out in better ways to our community and the world. Imagine what we could and would do if we even came close to 10% of our collective congregational income. We could fund the entire Abundant Life Ministry. PACEM (People and Churches Engaged in Ministry), our Loaves and Fishes Ministry, our mission trips would be fully funded and more. We would have plenty of money to make our church handicapped accessible. We could really be known as a church that exists not for ourselves but for the sake of others.

So, we’ve talked about money in polite company. But I also said that this sermon was about something more important than money. And it is. It’s clear from the rich young man’s question that this passage is about eternal life. *“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

The question is phrased the wrong way. There is nothing that we can do to inherit eternal life. Even if we think we’ve obeyed every commandment, each of us in some way is chasing after a false god. We cannot fix this problem on our own. I love what Alan Greenspan said to the BBC last month, identifying cause of the economic crisis. *“It’s **human nature**. Unless somebody can find a way to change **human nature**, we will have more crises, and none of them will look like this because no two crises have anything in common, except **human nature**.”* Maybe Greenspan should have been a theologian rather than an economist!

Our human nature chases after false gods, even though those gods increase our sorrow. Maybe your false god is money - Mammon, maybe it’s something else. Even if you give away 10% of your money, which I hope you do, you can’t earn your way into heaven.

So what must I do to inherit eternal life? The answer is nothing, because it’s all been done for you. It has been done for you by the one who though he was rich, became poor for your sake. Jesus had humble beginnings; born in a stable, raised in a no name town, reared in a carpenter’s family. He did this to save human nature. He died on a cross to give you the riches of heaven. That’s what grace is: G R A C E – **“God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense”**

No matter who you are, how much money you have or don’t have, even if you hoard your wealth or give it away self-righteously, Jesus looks at you and loves you. All you do in response is say “yes” and “thank you.” And if you are moved to give your money away in thanksgiving and gratitude, so much the better for you and for those in need. You will not go away sorrowing. Amen.