

Preaching on wealth

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Preaching on wealth is indeed a difficult challenge for any preacher to tackle especially since the Bible presents conflicting opinions. Wealth is often portrayed in the Bible as good. God promises prosperity to those who are faithful, yet the rich are derided for their greed and exploitation. Wisdom literature presents us with the best outlook on wealth: "Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and prosperity" (Prov 8: 18). "If riches are a desirable possession in life, what is richer than Wisdom, the active cause of all things" (Wis 8: 5)? "Riches are good, if they are free from sin; poverty is evil only in the opinion of the ungodly" (Sir 13:24). Jabez prayed to God, "Oh, that you may truly bless me and extend my boundaries! Help me and make me free of misfortune, without pain! And God granted his prayer" (1 Chr. 10).

Preaching on wealth or money in First World countries is far more chal-

lenging than preaching on sex or politics. Wealth implies power, privilege, status. It makes one an insider, it enables one to climb the ladder of success. It gives one a corner on the great resources of life like food, water and oil. Wealth has many shades of meaning. We often speak of a "wealth of information or knowledge," which is another way of looking at wealth. In one of her shows Oprah Winfrey said that as a child she thought that all white people were rich or wealthy.

Jesus makes it clear that wealth often prevents us from knowing the reign of God. Jesus spoke more about wealth than he did about prayer. He had rich friends like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Nicodemus brought the myrrh and aloes to anoint his body (Jn 21:38-39). Some women of means ministered to him during his public ministry (Mk 15:41). He frequently visited the home of

Martha (Lk 10:38). Zaccheus was certainly a rich man but Jesus dined with him (Lk 19: 5). What Jesus preached against was exploiting the poor and greed in its various forms.

Economic advancement

According to Wisdom literature affluence or wealth in itself is not sinful but is God's gift. When our pursuit or enjoyment of wealth makes us callous to the suffering of others, however, there is injustice. Economic advancement can cause poverty for others. How often we hear of a plant relocating and leaving in its wake hundreds of unemployed. An expanding economy, which has many benefits, often widens the gap between the rich and poor. Doesn't our market economy favor the rich and exploit the poor? Doesn't the world thrive on a lower economic class? The rich and wealthy become richer and the poor become a blip on the screen. According to a recent survey "the top one percent of Americans rose 157 percent at the same time that the lowest 20 percent of wage earners actually lost ground in earnings."¹ Another way of stating this is that the wealthiest 20 percent of our world's population gets almost

83 percent of our world's income while the poorest 20 percent get less than 2 percent. The average CEO receives \$1,566 an hour while the average worker receives \$7.39.²

"World Resources Institute says that someone living in a developed nation uses twice as much grain, three times as much meat, nine times as much paper, and eleven times as much gasoline as someone living in a developing nation. The problem is not a lack of resources but the way those resources are being disproportionately consumed. Another window into the same reality: 16 percent of the world's population spends 80 percent of the world's private consumption."³

Some of us have seen the statistics concerning the Global Village that shrinks the earth into a village of 100 people. The results are: 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere and 8 Africans. 52 would be female and 48 male. 70 would be non-white and 30 would be white. 70 would be non-Christian and 30 would be Christian. 89 would be heterosexual and 11 homosexual. 6 would possess 59 percent of the entire world's wealth (all six would be Americans), 80 would live in standard housing. 70 would be unable to read. 50 would suffer from malnutrition. One would be near death and one would be near birth. One would have a college education, and one own a computer.⁴ Those are sobering statistics. We might even have

this available for anyone interested as they leave church.

Money

Is money the root of all evil? (1 Tim. 6:10) No, it is not, especially when money is looked upon as a tool for good or evil. As preachers it is far easier to look upon money as the demon corrupting those who are wealthy. If money is the root of all evil, consumerism and materialism rank close to it. "The covetous person is never satisfied with money and the lover of wealth reaps no fruit from it; so this too is vanity" (Eccl 5:9). "Give me neither poverty nor riches, provide me only with the food I need" (Prov 30:8). Amos hammered away at the injustices of the rich. "Yes, I know how many are your crimes, how grievous your sins" (5:12). Since he spoke so forcefully against the foolishness of power and riches, he was called the prophet of social justice. Jesus the greatest prophet made it very clear that "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk 10:25). Jesus pulled the Apostles through the needle's eye and introduced them to the simplicity and freedom of the kingdom. How do we as preachers challenge our listeners to live in solidarity with the poor?

One form of power is money. Money is power and prestige. Paul

Getty, a very wealthy man, was asked to write his autobiography. He wrote it in just a few lines: I became a billionaire. This was his goal in life. What a contrast to a lady whom I met some years ago. She had many fond memories of her deceased husband. She always treasured one catchy statement, "Honey, we don't have a lot of money, but we have a lot of love." Money, as many rich people find out, is not the answer to happiness. Some of the poorest people I have met and know are some of the happiest people. Howard Hughes was asked, "With all your money, are you happy?" He replied, "No." According to marriage experts spouses argue mostly over money matters, and it has caused them much unhappiness. Many have drunk from the poisonous wells of money and power, and it has led to their destruction. In the Hebrew scriptures we read of Delilah who betrayed Samson for money. Judas sold Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Since then many have sold their Christian values across the counter through dishonest practices.

Craving after money can become a god in some people's lives. What are our self-made gods? Our god can be any value to which we give highest place in our lives. This will often be revealed to us in times of searing struggles or when choosing between two values. This value can be work, health, money, overeating, drink, immoral sex, or anything that controls

us. Jesus put it succinctly, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also" (Mt. 6:21). What do we think of most? Where are our thoughts centered? There are our hearts. We need to remind our listeners to "Let your life be free from love of money but be content with what you have" (Heb 13:5).

Greed

Greed has been defined in various ways, but Nancy Bloomer declares it a soul sickness.

No wonder prophets lashed out against it and the Fathers of the Church named it one of the deadly sins. Most of us are guilty of this vice because as Americans we consume more of the world's resources than needed. So it is a social vice. We need to ask why we are greedy. One reason is our reluctance to share. We can be greedy not only for money or material things, but also for prestige, power and success. We want more, and as we do, we shut others out thereby hurting ourselves as well as the community. A powerful example of greed can be found in Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings*. He dies trying to regain the ring. Recent corporate scandals demonstrate how top executives unjustly take the company's assets depriving employees of their pensions and jobs.

But it is not easy to preach about greed especially to people who want

more and who are in the denial stage. We need to be true, however, to the Gospel. We need to imitate John the Baptist who said, "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise (Lk 3:11). Mother Teresa explained the problem in this way: "The trouble is that rich people, well-to-do people, very often don't really know who the poor are; and that is why we can forgive them, for knowledge can only lead to love, and love to service. And so if they are not touched by them, it's because they do not know them."⁵

Jesus counseled the official who asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Besides observing the commandments he said, "There is still one thing left for you: sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me" (Lk 18:18-22). This is one of the saddest stories in the Gospel. Once he had encountered Jesus, Zaccheus said, "Behold, half of my possessions, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over" (Lk 19:8). Sons and daughters of Abraham do this.

Jesus could have told the official to renounce all that he had, but he tells him to go one step further, to give the proceeds to the poor. Jesus embraces the biblical concern for the poor as brought out in the Hebrew Scriptures. He also invites all of us

into his ministry of sharing the good news especially with the poor. Recall how someone said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me." He replied, "Friend, who appointed me as your judge and arbitrator?" Then he said to the crowd, "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist in possessions" (Lk 12: 13-15). Jesus also said, "When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Mt. 6:3-4). Anonymous donors

are truly to be commended. Jesus and his Apostles were taken care of by women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna and many others who provided for them out of their resources. They were willing to share themselves as so many women in the Church do today.

We read in the Acts of the Apostles, "The community of believers was of one heart and mind...There was no needy among them, for those who owned property or houses, would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the Apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need" (4:34-35). This characterized the early community as depicted by Luke. It follows that if they were of one mind and heart they would share their possessions and give

them to the Apostles. Contrast this with what follows: Ananias and Sapphira who hoarded their possessions and lied about the amount, resulting in their deaths. Later in the Acts we read how deacons were elected to take care of the widows who were being neglected (6:1). St. Paul quotes the words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (20:35).

Will there be enough?

Global questions that need to be addressed by preachers are: Will there be enough housing, food, clothing, medical and educational care to go around to meet others' needs especially with so much poverty and rampant suffering? Personal questions might be: Will I have enough pension funds especially since these funds have declined by one-third of their value? Will I be able to retire at 65 with our teetering economy or have to go back to work as many have once they retired? If there isn't enough to go around, some will have to do without.

We read in Luke's Gospel how Jesus was in a deserted place and crowds swelled to hear him. He spoke to them about the reign of God and healed those in need. Since the day was drawing to a close he told the disciples to dismiss the crowds and "Give them some food your-

selves.” They replied, “Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people.” So Jesus instructs them to have the five thousand recline in groups of fifty. “Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets” (Lk 9:11-17). The assumption here is that God will provide what we need. God’s creation implies that there will be enough for birds, fish, animals, as well as human beings. But that means equal distribution. And as Shakespeare says, “There is the rub.”

Wants and needs

We need to point out the difference between wants and needs. Certainly not everything that we want is what we need. We are constantly bombarded by means of television, radio, newspapers, magazines to buy, buy, and, of course, pay later. As the saying goes, “shop until you drop.” Naturally we want more things, but do we really need them? A ripple effect results when the Third World doesn’t get what it needs. It is also true that when the govern-

ment gives the richest people tax cuts the poor have their benefits and services reduced. How guilty are we as a Church in identifying with upper classes or a higher social level? Plato once said that simplicity doesn’t mean we have to live in misery and poverty. What it means is we have what we need, and we don’t want anything we don’t need.

Greed and excessive wealth become a cancer to many. It was certainly true of Solomon wise though he was. It is difficult to explain escalating levels of homelessness and hunger in the richest country in the world. St. Ambrose maintained that nature doesn’t make distinctions between rich and poor, but treats all the same. He asks, is there any difference between one dead man and another? How can it be that many have resources, a nice home, health care etc. while others live in dire poverty? It is because we were born into a white, middle-class culture, and that gives us opportunities that others don’t have. God does not desire poverty but expects people to be accountable how they treat the poor. God is, according to Walter Bruggemann, preoccupied with the poor. Giving is meant not only to relieve suffering but also to eliminate it. Virtue alone never feeds the poor and hungry. It is giving that matters just as much as how we give. St. James admonishes us, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only, de- luding yourselves” (1:22).

Ask our listeners, do we share or hoard what we have? We need to ask questions about the wise and foolish virgins (Mt. 25: 1-13). Did the wise ones point out ahead of time that the others would not have enough oil? Were they really afraid they would not have enough if they shared their oil? Did they really enjoy themselves once they entered the banquet hall? Did Jesus spend time trying to answer these questions? By knowing the plight of others how can we enjoy our many blessings if we don’t share them? How can we enjoy health care when millions of people don’t have it, or food when others are starving?

Words known by the company they keep

It is true that words are known by the company they keep. We need to look at Mary’s *Magnificat*. It contrasts the proud with the humble and the rich with the hungry (Lk 1: 51-53). We see this in Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). What a hyperbolic contrast between the two men, as well as between the lavish banquet table where Dives eats and the few crumbs that Lazarus receives. We often overlook the compassion of the rich man who implores Abraham, “I beg you, father, send him (Lazarus) to my father’s house, for I have five broth-

ers." He wants them to be warned lest they too come to the place of torment. But his compassion is misplaced: the inner circle, his brothers. That is the concern of the rich and wealthy, their friends or rich people, so they are able to be repaid. Then Jesus makes it clear that they have their reward. He also declares that when having a banquet, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. Blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Lk 14: 13-14). How many Catholics feast at the table of Dives while Lazarus lies out in the street begging for some crumbs?

Contrast Jesus' sermon on the mount "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours," to "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Lk 6: 20,24). Or contrast the parable of the rich man who wanted to tear down his barns and build larger ones so he could store more grain and other goods. Then he would be able to eat, drink and be merry. He is considered a fool because his life will be demanded that very night (Lk. 12: 16-21).
Yes, preaching this message on wealth and riches effectively is in-

deed very challenging. But if we proclaim we are Gospel preachers we cannot shun away from this responsibility. Jesus did not. He preached frequently about this subject because he knew human nature so well, our desire for power, privilege, status, money, and always wanting more. We have to continue to remind our listeners, as well as ourselves, to be attuned to the cry of the poor. We might not be able to end all the poverty and pain, or resolve all the injustices, but all of us can share.

FOOTNOTES

1. Andre Resner, Jr. "Reading the Text for Economic Justice: Mark 12:38 for Stewardship Season," *LIVING PULPIT* (April-June 2003) 6.
2. Ched Myers, "Why Sabbath Economics?" *LIVING PULPIT* (April-June) 14.
3. John W. Wimberly, Jr. "Sharing Versus Hoarding," *LIVING PULPIT* (April-June) 42.
4. *Ibid.* 35.
5. *Ibid.* 10.

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"The parish as a community cannot insulate itself from the realities of the world around it. The Christian community must be attentive to issues of social justice and spiritual hunger in society. What Jesus offers to his followers must be shared with all peoples, whatever their situation. For in him alone is the fullness of life."

—Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*