

10.13.2024 Pentecost 21

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

“You lack one thing”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus’ encounter with a rich man in today’s gospel begins with a question, “*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus brushed aside the flattering title, “*Good teacher,*” saying, “*No one but God is good.*” In doing so, Jesus was quietly bringing the first, second, and third commandments about God into the conversation, implying that we should love, worship, and honor only the goodness of God above all others.

In saying that only God is good, Jesus is helping us as we struggle with the problem of wealth by encouraging us to a spiritual humility that we might gain eternal life. Jesus is suggesting a humility that trusts in and worships God’s goodness rather than trusting in and worshipping the signs of our success, its wealth and possessions.

Jesus responded to the rich man’s question about eternal life, saying, “*You know the commandments.*” Do not commit murder, adultery, theft, bear false witness, covet or defraud your neighbor, and honor your father and mother. In reply, the rich man said, “*Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.*” Jesus then looked at the rich man with love and said, “*You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*” Jesus saw great potential in the rich man; he also saw the stumbling block of wealth.

The rich man’s question, “*What must I do...to inherit eternal life?*” is driven by the verb “to do.” Apart from the honoring of father and mother, notice that the commandments mentioned are all expressed negatively, as in don’t do this and don’t do that. For Jesus, gaining eternal life is not simply a matter of *not doing* things; rather, it is a matter of being, of trusting in God. Eternal life is not to be gained simply by doing and completing tasks. Eternal life is gained only in the letting go of the self and its association with wealth.

When the rich man heard Jesus’ reply, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. The rich man grieved because his very identity depended upon his wealth. He could not see or know himself apart from his possessions. So I ask: “Is there something you cling to that defines your own power and privilege in this world?” Is there something you could let go of if Jesus said, “*Go, sell, and give, and then come and follow me?*”? Jesus’ words, “*You lack one thing,*” point

to letting go and trusting in God for all things. What is the wealth that stands between you and eternal life?

It seems we lack for very little today. Comparatively, we are probably far wealthier than the rich man of Jesus' time. In addition to all the material wealth we possess, our modern-day wealth extends to healthcare, education, social welfare systems and many other signs of modern wealth. Our wealth allows us to live longer, more comfortably, and more securely. And for all the things that won't fit into our homes that we just can't let go of; we store them in clean climate-controlled storage lockers. Like a small private getaway, you can get a cup of coffee, go to your locker, and sit down with all your stuff. Yet though we are rich in things, you will never see a U-Haul trailer behind a hearse.

Can you echo John the baptist's words, "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (Jn. 3:30)? Can you downsize yourself in this world that Christ might increase in you? Jesus continues to come to us with the question of self-denial and self-abandonment so that in letting go of our love of this life, we might reach eternal life. Eternal life begins as we let go of our attachment to the things of this world.

Instead of giving the rich man a simple spiritual self-help checklist, Jesus wanted the rich man to think about himself and what he truly lacked. Jesus spoke clearly that the journey from reliance upon wealth to trust in eternal life is difficult, saying, "*How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.*" His disciples, astounded, asked, "*Then who can be saved?*" Jesus' words "*for with God all things are possible,*" reveal that God, rather than things, is the key that unlocks the way to eternal life.

Yet Jesus' words are hard to understand. Even his disciples struggled. They had left everything behind to follow him, but they had not yet left themselves behind. We know the story well: they abandoned Jesus as he was unjustly crucified as a criminal outside the gate of Jerusalem.

Today's reading from Amos helps us struggle with the dilemma of wealth and privilege as it is contrasted with poverty and injustice. Amos described how those with wealth manipulated legal proceedings in their favor, pushing aside the needs and claims of the poor "*at the gate.*" "At the gate" is a phrase meaning, the village or town gate, as the place where public legal proceedings were held. "*At the gate*" signifies a legal system so corrupted by wealth that justice is never achieved.

Today's passage from Amos ends with the words, "*Hate evil and love good, and establish justice*

*at the gate.*” Jesus gave his life outside the gate so that we might work for justice in the gate, in the systems of this world, using our lives and wealth for others. Jesus’ cross reveals a self-giving and self-abandoning love – the imitation of which leads to eternal life.

In a world driven by wealth and the worship of the wealthy, Amos and Jesus’ words continue to challenge us. Amos and Jesus stand in a prophetic tradition that helps us see our ongoing tendency to view those with wealth and power as somehow blessed and anointed by God, while viewing the poor as those who haven’t worked hard enough. As much as we believe in a democratic society in which all are equal, our use of wealth and how we share or don’t share it says differently.

Jesus’ words, “*You lack one thing,*” lay bare our spiritual poverty of thinking that simply doing this or not doing that is enough to inherit eternal life. Our Christian respectability of following the rules, being upstanding citizens, of being “lily-white,” is the clearest indictment upon our trust in God’s goodness for all things.

*You lack one thing* points to the hardest thing of all – a self-denial and forsaking of ourselves that relies upon respectability, power, privilege, and wealth. In our aspirational world of class and privilege, “*You lack one thing*” is the hardest gospel to hear because wealth is an obstacle to spiritual life. Rather than building homes and vineyards, which we will never fully enjoy in this life, can you envision using your wealth to build a better and more just world as your legacy? Eternal life begins in letting go of our attachments to this life.

Life is short. Eternal life begins now. Trust that with God all things are possible. Let go of yourself. You will discover a new and more powerful self than you can imagine.

God grace will shape and free you to live for others. Live into the verbs Jesus uses: “*Go, sell, give, and come and follow me.*”

Open your heart to God and your hands to your neighbor.

It is the way to eternal life. Amen.