

The Strength of Vulnerability

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Mark 10:17-31

“How hard it will be for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of God.” We know who Jesus is talking about don’t we? Donald Trump comes to mind. Yes, it’s true that a couple of weeks ago, Donald did say he was a Presbyterian. I am not sure he actually produced a certificate that would confirm his membership, but even if he does have Presbyterian pedigree there is no escaping all those towers and buildings with his name on them. If Jesus was talking about anyone, than Trump with all his billions must be on the list of those who will have a challenging time squeezing into the Realm of God.

Donald, of course, is far from alone. If you are a border guard for God’s Realm and someone shows up with a passport marked 1% there is a very good chance their name is on a list of high risk people who have been denied admission. “How hard it is for those with wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.”

Pope Francis in a speech he gave in Bolivia put his finger on at least part of the problem when it comes to wealth and its use. Quoting a fourth century bishop, he called the unfettered pursuit of money, “the dung of the devil: and said poor countries should not be reduced to being providers of raw material and cheap labor for developed countries...Let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural

change,” the pope said, decrying a system that “has imposed the mentality of profit at any price, with no concern for social exclusion or the destruction of nature”.

Although some consider the Popes words to be radical, they are nothing more than reclaiming a dominant and central theme of Scripture. Our text from Amos today is only one example among many of the prophetic challenges raised by Scripture when it comes to the accumulation of wealth. *Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins — you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.*

In his book “God’s Politics”, James Wallis writes that when he was in the seminary he and a group of fellow seminarians scoured the Bible for references about poverty and wealth. Wallis states, “we found several thousand verses on the poor and God’s response to injustice. We found it to be the second most prominent theme in the Hebrew Scripture – the first was idolatry, and the two were often related. One of every sixteen verses in the New Testament is about the poor or the subject of money (mammon as the Gospel calls it). In the first three Gospels it is one out of ten and in the book of Luke, it one in seven!”

“How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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." It is almost as if Jesus imagines a big wall has been created along the border in order to keep out undesirables whose values are in conflict with the Realm of God. In all honesty, most of us won't lose that much sleep over Donald or a few billionaires for once discovering their money and wealth is unable to buy them the access to which they believe they are entitled.

There are only two problems with this conclusion. First, Mark does tell us that when Jesus spoke to the wealthy man, he did so with love. He had many possessions; perhaps a big home on Summit Ave., another out on Lake Minnetonka, a small yacht on the St. Croix. He may have even owned a sports franchise or two. None of that stood in the way for Jesus who Mark says "loved him". Apparently, if we are following the way of Jesus, no one gets written off because of their wealth. This actually is good news for those of us living in countries who have a more highly developed standard of material comforts. Even though most of us have no aspirations beyond becoming middle class, to much of the world, we all look like some version of Donald Trump.

The other problem that comes from trying to separate ourselves from Donald and the 1%, where so much wealth actually resides, is the disciples. Mark tells us that when Jesus offers his assessment of the challenges faced by the wealthy in entering the Realm of God, the disciples are perplexed and astounded. "Then who can be saved?" they ask. "If Donald Trump and the 1% have trouble gaining admission into

God's Realm, how in the world can the rest of us ever imagine we will gain access?"

The problem for the disciples is our problem as well. The issue has less to do with how much we have in our savings account, whether or not we own a house or two, or whether we are invested in the stock market. The central problem made evident by the disciples is that the values associated with the accumulation of wealth are culturally pervasive and no matter where we are on the economic scale, we can be and are affected by values which stand in direct conflict with Realm of God values.

The wealthy man who comes to see Jesus does so with cultural values that one can only conclude from their response have been adopted by the disciples as well. "If the 1% have a hard time gaining access to God's Realm, than who can?"

One of those values is made evident right from the very beginning, by how the wealthy man addresses Jesus and in turn Jesus' response. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" To which Jesus immediately replies, "Why do you call me good. No one is good, but God alone." The prophet Amos says goodness is a way of living, an orientation towards God's justice, God's realm. "Seek good and not evil...Hate evil, love good and establish justice in the gate". In the Realm of God, goodness offers direction for one's life. For the wealthy man and all of us who are influenced by the same culturally dominant value, goodness is an accomplishment. Goodness is something you

achieve, which is why the wealthy man asks, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” When Jesus reminds the man of the commandments, serving as sign posts to the direction of goodness, the man responds, “check, check, check. All of them done. Completed my assignment. 100% on the exam. I have a perfect record”.

Defining goodness by our achievements, what we have accomplished, what we can prove and demonstrate is a value favored by empires, a value favored by economic systems that exploit the poor and exploit the earth. Goodness is equated with accomplishments and if that is the yard stick then wealth is a good measure of our achievements. We may never be in the billionaires club or the millionaires club, but no one needs a hefty bank account to share the value that our goodness, our worth as human beings can be and is measured by what we accomplish. Are you good enough? Have you done enough? Are you perfect? Have you come up short in any way?

We strive to prove ourselves good with our family, good with our friends, good in school, good in our places of work, good with our church community. Churches are often full of people who have adopted this dominant cultural value of proving our goodness, demonstrating our goodness by all that we accomplish.

Goodness as an accomplishment fits comfortably with another dominant cultural value of being in control, being in charge of our own destiny. “What must I do?” says the wealthy man. Behind the question is the belief that he is able to take charge and carry out whatever it is that

is needed. He can be and will be in control. It is a compelling value. All of us want to be as self-reliant, independent, as in charge of our own future as we can possibly be. If you listen to the debates about what should be done about Russia, Korea, Syria, part of the story we tell ourselves as a nation is that we have accomplished much good in the world and that goodness must be maintained by our power, our strength and by remaining in control.

“How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.” The possession of wealth no doubt acerbates the challenge that we face, because wealth reinforces the notion that goodness can be measured by our accomplishments and it reinforces the illusion that we are in control.

Dominant cultural values see our vulnerability to one another, our vulnerability to life itself as a weakness to be rejected and overcome. Jesus invites the wealthy man to let go of his accomplishments as a measure of his goodness, let go of the control which gives him the illusion of security and instead embrace the strength of vulnerability that comes from trusting God, relying on one another, opening his heart to those in need. To the disciples Jesus says, those who follow my way “will receive a hundred fold now in this age – houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, and children and field.” In her book *Scarred by Struggle*, Sr. Joan Chittister has a chapter on vulnerability in which she says this, “Vulnerability renders all of us human, welcomes us into the human

race, makes humanity an unbreakable bond....Vulnerability is the call to self-acceptance. It is the great, liberating moment on the human journey”.

Jesus says to the wealthy man, “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.” Or put another way, “Let it go and receive the strength of your vulnerability, knowing you are valued for who you are, knowing you have nothing to prove, trusting you will never be alone, living toward the goodness & justice of God’s Realm.

Presbyterian or not, all of Donald Trump’s wealth, will not help him one bit when it comes to living by the values of God’s Realm. Jesus says to the disciples, for Donald it will never be possible on his own to gain access to this new justice focused way of living in God’s Realm, but for God anything is possible. After all according to Jesus God’s love never ends, for Donald or any of us. The invitation is there, come follow me, into this transformed way of life, where vulnerability is strength, where the first will be last, and the last will be first.” It is an invitation given in love to the wealthy man and it is an invitation given in love to us.

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

The Hebrew prophets never flinch from telling people when they have turned away from the values of God's goodness and justice, instead living by the dominant values that remain so prevalent. Nowhere does the prophet speak more directly than when it comes to how the wealthy treat the poor. Yet, in spite of the prophetic words of judgment, prophets also seldom fail to remind the people, that God is a God of grace, who invites them into a new and just way of living.

Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins — you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Mark 10:17-31

In our Gospel lesson today, the disciples find themselves perplexed and astounded by Jesus response to a wealthy man who comes to see Jesus in hopes of learning what he can do to inherit eternal life.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him 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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."