

For all those out there who may have wondered if the gospel is still relevant, fear not. The gospel speaks now as clearly as ever. And our passage today is a prime example. What could be more relevant than Jesus's words about wealth?

Our reading today has three sections: how to deal with inheritances; how to approach basic needs; and what the material lifestyle of disciples looks like. The word 'wealth' isn't mentioned anywhere. But clearly, Jesus is setting the terms for how his followers relate to material resources.

Now why would Jesus our Lord preach about such things? Isn't his kingdom not of this world? True enough, the kingdom of God transcends this world. But it's also very much about this world and how we live in it. Jesus believes that wealth or 'mammon' is a force that seeks to rival God. Wealth is very useful, but also very alluring. It can easily become an idol. So, Jesus trains up his disciples on how to keep wealth in its proper place. We might sum up his teaching something like this: trust God, use wealth. Be very careful not to trust wealth, use God.

Maybe it's not obvious, but the man who asks for help dividing his inheritance wants to use Jesus. He needs an arbitrator, a judge, because his brother is holding on to everything after the funeral, and Jesus seems like the fairest person anyone could hope to find. Surely, his brother would not dare to argue with the moral

authority of Jesus. So, the man taps Jesus as his resource for justice. "Jesus, tell my brother to give me my fair share of the inheritance." It's not about the stuff, you see, it's about justice. I can't tell you how many otherwise well-meaning families have fought and bled over the just division of the inheritance.

I have sympathy for the fellow who wants what's coming to him. But Jesus is concerned about something else. "Careful," he warns. "Be on guard for all types of greed." Apparently, Jesus thinks it is about the stuff, and doesn't see a whole lot of difference between the brother who's holding on and the brother who wants his half. **Both** are close to making too much of possessions, and that's a problem because life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Is Jesus saying if we really, really want what's in the will that's a warning that we are taking wealth too seriously? Anyway, Jesus won't let himself be used by us, even if the laws of inheritance are on our side. He would rather help us be *free*.

It looks like the farmer in the parable is about to be free. What a harvest! So big his barn isn't big enough to hold all of it. So, what to do? He decided to tear down his old barn and build a bigger one, which is one way to handle prosperity. But his self-talk is revealing. The farmer believes that once he has his stockpile, he can eat, drink, relax, and finally be happy. His wealth will make him free.

But it didn't work out that way. That very night it was over for him, just like that. I read the autopsy. Turns out the farmer had a terminal illness. He was human, and he couldn't control the future. God called him a fool. Why? Because he thought he could secure himself and perhaps those who came after him. Mammon is very tricky this way. Wealth loads us up with feelings of security. But these feelings, as the story shows, are false. The feelings are real, but misleading.

I remember a quote I overheard between an auctioneer and a preacher. The auctioneer said, "I liquidate in 6 hours what a family accumulates over a lifetime." Woah! Ouch! If that makes you anxious, if you want to hold on even tighter, I'm with you, but those feelings are false. Real, but misleading, because life, true life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. Be warned. It's possible to accumulate a lot and have nothing of value.

After my mother died, we asked my brother Steve if we could help him clear out her room at the nursing home. "No worries," he said. "They boxed up her stuff for us, and told us we could pick it up whenever we're ready. Won't be much," he said. I was sad that all she left behind were a few boxes. Then, I remembered how my mother and father lived. Long before they died, they were paring down, giving away their things to Goodwill or relatives or friends. Mom, along with Dad, gave 10% to the

church for her whole life. Then, for many years they gave extra checks each month to our denomination's seminary, university and children's home. I'm still sad when I think how little my mother had at her death. But those real feelings are misleading. Because my parents were rich, rich they were toward God. Their treasure was in heaven, Jesus would say, which doesn't mean they're counting their gold every day. It means they have inherited the truest treasures of all.

Jesus wants us to be free. He wants to poke holes in our illusions that wealth secures. He wants to cast out unwarranted fears that we won't have enough, so that we can truly live. And so, he launches into an extended discussion about God's provision. Don't worry, he says, about what we will eat, drink or wear. God knows our needs, and God will provide.

It's important that we remember who's doing the talking here: Jesus. And Jesus understands our anxiety because he was one of us, a person who had to eat, drink and have something to wear. He knows how easy it is for us to fixate on those basic needs. If he had lived in the Hamptons, and had sent us today's sermon from the cozy confines of his well-appointed personal library, dressed in his three piece suit, we might dismiss him, and rightfully so. But notice he only has a few things to wear, his sandals are worn, and he has no place to lay his head. It's this

Jesus, the Jesus who has much less than us who tells us life is more food and the body more than clothing. He's not speaking from a position of economic power, but from experience. I think we can trust him.

And what he tells us, dear children, is that God knows what we need. It may feel like we scratch and claw to survive. In fact, God is generous and provides. Jesus even has a couple of illustrations to share with us. First, the ravens. Jesus points out we've never seen a raven behind a plow or building a barn. Yet, they have what they need to eat. Second, the lilies. Nobody has ever seen a flower make fabric. Yet, we all marvel at how beautifully they are dressed. God provides for flowers and birds. And if God is sensitive to their needs, how much more sensitive will God be to ours? Why worry when it doesn't add a day to our lives and may take away a few?

Now, you might point out that there are some folks nearby who don't have enough food or clothing, especially children, and oh how they suffer. You are absolutely right. But I have to wonder if those little birdies suffer, not because of God's failure to provide, but because the other birds are scared to share. Maybe the problem isn't a lack of ample food, but a preponderance of anxiety, fear that we'll run out if we are generous like God is generous. I'm looking in the mirror when I say that.

Everybody worries of course. But that's part of the point.

Whether we have a little, some or a lot doesn't seem to solve the problem. Trust in God's provision is the only thing that solves the problem. And we have to work on that trust our whole lives.

When we trust in God's provision, then we're free to focus our efforts on concerns that matter even more like loving our neighbors, forgiving our enemies, enjoying our families and friends, taking adventures of faith and helping Greeneville be a just and peaceable place to live. Reflecting the magnificent grace of God, living under the kind and exhilarating rule of Christ, striving for the kingdom: that's where our attention can be as we learn to give up our false, though real, worry.

As our trust in the word of Jesus grows, and our anxiety about material security lessens, we are freer to give. Less clinging; more sharing. Less worry about having enough; more satisfaction in helping others have enough. Jesus told us that God is like one of those doting fathers who can't wait to lavish gifts on his sweet children, the only difference being that God the Father wants to give us the most blessed gift of all, the kingdom. And the more assured we are that the kingdom is ours, that not even death will get in the way of us receiving the wealth of love God has in store for us, the more pleasurable it becomes for us to turn over our resources to God's purposes. We work on this our whole lives.

There's a danger here – you may have sniffed it out already – that we will use the words of Jesus for the church's fundraising project, that we will narrow discipleship to supporting the church budget or reduce giving to propping up the church. So, let me be clear. I believe we give to God when we take up an offering, not primarily to the church or the budget, though I love the church and support the budget. And I also believe that the words of Jesus we have been hearing this morning apply just as much to the church's checking account as they do to each of ours. So, the idea here isn't that each of us will give generously and sacrificially to the church so that the church can then hold onto those gifts and be secure. No, we give to God, who then receives and multiplies those gifts, and then through the church uses those gifts to bless the world. The monies pool here briefly so they can gain strength. But then they go out to do God's work. And I can say with complete confidence that those who oversee the financial life of this congregation share this vision.

When Lynne and I went out West – I think I mentioned you would have to put up with a few of these illustrations – when we went out West, we saw many glacier fed lakes. Snow and ice melt from the mountains fed into these lakes, tumbling down from waterfalls, large and small. A beauty to behold. But the melted ice didn't stay in the lakes we saw. Every one of them had a river

flowing out of them, usually a roaring, foaming outlet that watered and gave life to the valley below.

But I've heard of a lake that has no outlet. Tributaries flow in, but none flow out because the lake itself is below sea level. Do you remember the name of this lake? The Dead Sea. For there to be life, you got to have flow.

I hear the grace of God flowing through the words of Jesus. And I hear a call to let the same grace flow through us and through the church. It's a call to let go of what we have for God's purposes, to cling to God instead of our resources so that the hurting world might be blessed. Let me ask you a question. Do you think Jesus has taught us this morning about how to relate to our wealth because he wants to take advantage of us? Or, do you think this man who went to the cross for us is speaking because he wants us truly alive and free?

Trust God who knows your every need, and use wealth. Trust God to provide. Be on guard against greed of all kinds, and let your resources flow, so that, like Jesus, you can be alive and free.