

**“Jesus and the Rich Man”**  
**by Rev. Kathie Jackson**  
**Mark 10:17-31**

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this country entered what is known as the “Gilded Age.” With no federal income tax railroad magnates, meat packers, fur traders and chewing gum kings amassed great fortunes and lived like aristocrats. The average American family back then earned \$340/year while the William K. Vanderbilts built a summer home at Newport over four years and at a cost of \$11 million.

According to Mr. Ward McAllister, who was the ultimate arbiter for the nouveau riche, there were only 400 people who really belonged to New York society and a family’s place on the social scene was extremely important. While the gentlemen were busy managing and increasing the family fortunes their wives competed to outdo one another with entertaining. At one of the homes ‘the center of the table was covered with sand; at each place there was a small sterling pail with a matching shovel. At a given signal the 50 guests dug frantically in the sand in front of them for their favors – thousands of dollars’ worth of rubies, sapphires, emeralds and diamonds.

One of the society matrons was Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish of Newport, RI. She had an entertainment budget of upwards \$200,000 a season. Mrs. Fish, Mamie as she was known, always claimed to be unimpressed with money, impatient with high society and bored with ostentation. After all, her husband, president of the Illinois Central Railroad, still had to work for a living. “We’re not really rich,” she said. “We only have a few million.” While everyone else in her social circle knew everyone well, she pretended not to remember their names. It is reported that she would always welcome her guests to her balls with an impatient ‘howdy do, howdy do’ moving among them with obvious annoyance. “Make yourselves at home and believe me there is no one who wishes you were there more than I do” she would say.

It seemed Mrs. Fish had little use for society and yet there were times when it seemed she wanted to overwhelm it. She saw its values as trivial and senseless, but then she would throw a lavish party for her friends’ dogs and provide her own dog with a \$15,000 diamond collar. It doesn’t seem that what Mrs. Fish claimed to believe about money and how she spent it really lined up. It seems there was something missing from her life, something all her money could not buy.

One day a man came to Jesus, knelt in front of him, and asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. “You know the commandments” Jesus told him. “I do” said the man, “and I have kept them from my youth.” “Well then” said Jesus, “you lack only one thing. Sell what you own and give the money to the poor. You will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.” The man went away sorrowful for he had many possessions.

Jesus then turned to his disciples and said “how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God. It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” His disciples were astounded, they looked at each other and asked, “Then who can be saved?”

I don’t know about you, but this story makes me squirm a little bit every time I hear it. I don’t like hearing how hard it is to enter the Kingdom. I don’t like hearing Jesus tell someone to sell everything they have, give the money to the poor and only then they can follow him. Is Jesus really serious here?

I try to comfort myself a little by telling myself that Jesus said this to a rich person and I’m not rich, at least not rich like Mrs. Fish, or Bill Gates, or Elon Musk

And then, I read other statistics, numbers like how 8% of the world’s population, about 648 million people, live in extreme poverty with less than \$2.15 US a day. Close to 46% of the world population lives on less than \$5.50/day. UNICEF reports that 190 million children are at risk from water related crisis. The poverty guideline for a family of four is \$31,200. If you make more than that you are not considered to be living in poverty. I hear these numbers and then I think to myself ‘Maybe I am rich in someone’s eyes. Maybe Jesus is talking to me.’

I hear these hard words from Jesus, and I understand why the disciples turn to one another in astonishment and ask, “Who has a chance to enter the Kingdom?” Does Jesus really expect people to sell everything and then come and follow him? Why is Jesus making this so hard?

The truth is most of us don’t live like the rich and famous, we don’t brag about how much money we make or spend on cars, homes, entertainment or how much we give to the latest political or social cause.

It’s not that we don’t have an opinion about how money should be used. We do have an opinion especially when it comes to church budgets. We all have our favorite causes – mission, outreach, worship, education. We all have no problem voicing our opinion about how the church budget should or should not be used. What most of us do have a problem with is someone telling us how much we should contribute to the cause. We have worked hard for our money, and we believe it really is no one else’s business what we do with it. At least in Presbyterian circles, what one person gives or does not give to the church is a well-guarded secret and we think it would not be proper to talk about the details of personal giving.

In fact, if Jesus was really politically correct, he would not even mention such a personal and private subject as personal finances. Well, it seems Jesus doesn’t have a bit of a problem talking about personal and private matters. I’ve read that Jesus taught about money on 24 separate occasions in the gospels. Evidently, Jesus, a poor itinerant preacher and teacher, who had no place to call his home, thought money was very important.

There could be many reasons why Jesus thought money is important. Perhaps though he talked about money so often because he knew he was hitting a soft spot in our lives. Maybe Jesus talked about money so much because he knew how easy it was, and is, to let money become god in our lives.

Looking back at the Gilded Age it seems so wasteful, so foolish to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on a few hours of entertainment, at least to most of the people I know. Although there are probably some super wealthy people who still spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on entertainment, most of the people I know would never spend money that way. If we were all that rich, we would be good stewards, responsible spenders, generous givers, wouldn’t we? We would never worship money or all that it can buy, now, would we? We know that money cannot buy true happiness. And yet it is still so easy to believe that more money will make us happier.

We live in a culture that bombards us with messages that money is the answer to all of our problems and there simply isn’t enough of it to go around. We buy things to feel good about ourselves not just because we need a new pair of shoes, or a new computer or a new phone. And if the new shoes don’t help us feel better, well we will just keep looking for something else to buy that will.

At least the rich man in today’s story recognized there was something missing in his life. He comes to Jesus and kneels before him. When people kneel before Jesus in Mark’s gospel it is because they are asking to be healed, to be made whole. Perhaps if Mrs. Fish had come to Jesus in the same way she wouldn’t have caused such a sensation as she did when at one of her parties, she put a doll at every other place at the table and limited the conversation to baby talk. She never seemed to understand that something wasn’t quite right about her life. In contrast the rich man knew there could be more to his life; he just couldn’t bring himself to do anything as drastic as what Jesus called for in order to set his life right.

The disciples couldn’t understand either. Who can be saved they asked, and Jesus answered their question this way ‘For humans, it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.’

All things are possible for God. Entering the Kingdom life, salvation, being made whole is possible only because of what God has freely given to us. Jesus makes Kingdom life possible by giving all he had, his body, his blood, his life. He gave it all for the rich man, for Mrs. Fish, for you and for me.

Jesus came to show us the way to live, which is the way of relationship and love and generosity. Jesus came to show us the truth, that money is not god. Jesus came to show us the life God desires for us, which is a life lived in relationship, a life of abundance. We exhibit Kingdom life when we are willing to share out of abundance, to give it all away.

It's a hard saying we hear this morning. Rich or poor or somewhere in the middle Jesus' words hit us where we are vulnerable. I can't help but squirm a bit when I hear these words. I can't help but wonder how I can begin to move from looking at the world through a lens of scarcity and begin to see through a lens of abundance.

And then I pause for a moment to consider the blessings I have received and often don't even notice every day. Blessings like life, blessings like friends and family and church, blessings like work and leisure time, blessings like the country in which I live, blessings like prayer and hymns and food and rest; blessings like opportunities to share all that I have and by so doing bless another and help to make another's life more abundant.

The reason we talk about stewardship, which is really just how we respond to God's blessing to us, God's giving to us all that we have and hope to be; the reason we do this is because Jesus talked about it often. He talked about money and the way it is to be used and shared; he also talked about love and service and about salvation. Jesus talked about these things and then he did more than talk, he gave up all he had, his very life on a cross.

As you well know this is Stewardship Sunday and in the next couple of weeks you are asked to consider how you will respond to Jesus' words. Some here can give much out of their abundance. Some of you may sacrifice to give anything.

You may echo the disciples' words – how hard this is. Jesus knows it is hard. He also knows it is possible to do hard things when one turns to God in faith and thanksgiving.

Your stewardship verse from 2 Peter invites you all to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ together. In your newsletter you emphasized your desire to do this together as a community of faith, to build on the foundation of abundant ministry here at Trinity together. This morning hear Jesus' words of invitation to come and seek the Kingdom life, the abundant life and give as God has made you able. Give in thanksgiving for the love and grace of God that gathers you here; give trusting God will guide both you and this community to use all of its resources for the glory of God and for building the Kingdom.

Give with the psalmist's prayer – 'Prosper the work of our hands. Prosper the work of our hands.'

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Mrs. Fish's story comes from "One Hundred Tons of Ice and Other Gospel Stories" by Lawrence Wood.