

Have you noticed, Jesus doesn't seem to have much good to say about the accumulation of wealth. There's the parable we heard today about stock piling grain. The prodigal son is about wanting money. The rich young man who wanted to know about salvation and Jesus told him to give everything he had to the poor.

In fact, in a part of the Acts of the Apostles we don't talk about a lot, we're told that the early disciples sold all they had and combined their assets in a communal sort of living, some times called Christian Communism. In the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, in what I call the ultimate stewardship text, a husband and wife sell their property and then lie to the church about how much they got. Both of them drop dead.

Wealth doesn't get a good mark in the New Testament.

Isn't it funny then, that Communist countries are almost always atheistic and that most Christian countries are either capitalistic or socialistic with some deep pockets of capitalism? Isn't capitalism contrary to Christianity? I don't think so, but it's a compelling question. Even that icon of capitalism, Barry Goldwater, said that capitalism without charity was doomed. Interesting.

Most of you have probably heard the expression, the Protestant Work Ethic. It seems to mean a lot of different things to different people, but the term comes from the title of a book written by Max Weber. In it, he correlates the rise of the middle class with the theological concept of election, where some people are chosen by God for salvation and some are not. (We don't prescribe to this, but after the Reformation, it was a big part of those faiths coming from Calvin and Zwingli like Presbyterian and Baptist.)

A theory developed that one of the ways to tell who the elect were is that they would be prosperous in this life. So, people would work very, very hard so that they would become prosperous, and therefore prove their election. They wouldn't have said that working hard saved them, it just proved they already were.

This view morphed into what we might call the Gospel of Prosperity where it's not hard work, but one's faith that creates wealth. God rewards the faithful. This is still very prominent. I know I pick on televangelists and not all of them fall into this group, but when a pastor appears wealthier than his or her flock, I have to wonder if that's not the prosperity Gospel talking.

One of the problems with both the elect are prosperous and the faith prosperity camps is that they tend to quote that most well known scriptural text, "God helps those who help themselves". Which, by the way, is not out of the scripture, rather that great deist Ben Franklin.

This seems to say that the poor are less worthy of our love and perhaps even God's love than those whose work (or faith) has brought them relative wealth. "God must love me because I'm rich. I wonder what that poor person has done to be relegated to poverty. If they just worked harder, God would reward them with more. Not as much as he's rewarded me, but enough so that they can quit sucking us dry through welfare, those ungrateful deadbeat, drug addicted, illegals." Sorry. I got a little carried away there.

I think Governor Goldwater was right (at least this once). Capitalism has an inherent weakness. Unless concern for those who do not attain wealth is a part of the ethos, unrestrained capitalism will doom, if not itself, then an entire segment of the population – the permanent underclass to use Marxist language.

I think that is what Jesus was reacting to. The economic and political system of Israel at that time was one in which there were those who accumulated wealth and those that had very little. The rich man of our parable had a lot and kept it for himself so that his life would be easy. On the other hand, in the story of Nicodemus, he tells Jesus that he gives back to the poor a portion, at least 10%, of all that he has. Jesus compliments Nicodemus while ridiculing those who don't.

There's a concept that comes out of our feudal past called noblesse oblige, or nobility comes with obligation. Jesus would agree. With resources comes the obligation of using those resources for the betterment of those without.

Jesus criticism of the rich farmer wasn't that he was wealthy, but that he hoarded his wealth for himself and, "was not rich toward God".

As many of you know, I've been to the Dominican Republic and Honduras several times. This year, I also went with a group of our kids to Pine Island to work in a very low income neighborhood. I always come away from those trips feeling a little guilty. I spend more on dinner than some of those folks make in a day or even a week. We have 3 cars. We have air conditioning, a refrigerator, a stove, hot water, heck, clean water. I have a job. And although I am a very hard working priest (said sarcastically), I don't work nearly as hard as a typical Honduran laborer, or a typical American laborer for that matter. I have never picked cotton, cut sugar, trimmed palm trees or picked tomatoes for a living. And I make 5 to 8 times what a day laborer makes just 15 miles from here.

We give 10% of my income to the church and more outside the church. In 2 years or so, we'll be tithing on total household income. And I intend for that to continue to grow. I do it

because I think God is grieved over the greediness of my heart. I don't think it affects my salvation. But it does affect my relationship with God. I also know it affects my spiritual relationship with the rest of the world.

A few years ago, I used as an example of greedy accumulation of wealth the owning of Rolex watches. I offended a couple of people. Well, I may have offended a lot of people, but two let me know about it. They, of course, both wore Rolexes. They also were very generous. I don't know if they tithed or not. (They didn't tithe entirely here.) But, \$10,000 for a watch?

There's a show on MTV that I've seen a couple of times. It's called Cribs and it's not about baby beds. It's a tour of a famous celebrity or musician. It is a study in ostentation and excess. They showed Richard Branson of Virgin Records and Virgin Airlines fame's private island in the Caribbean. The home is valued at \$100 million. All of his bathrooms have unrestricted views of the ocean. Come on.

Now I'm not trying to judge anyone. God knows, there's enough to judge me with. But I do ask you to think about priorities. Walk around our parking lot after church. Does your vehicle reflect your financial commitment to God and God's poorest children? You know, with very few exceptions, I don't know what you give to the church. But, as I walk around the church after services, I wonder why, with all the funds tied up in Detroit and Tokyo hardware, we struggle to maintain our budget or even why we have to have a capital campaign for such a small job as repairing the Nave and Sanctuary of the Church.

Capitalism has produced innumerable advances in health, science and even as unlikely fields as religion. I'm an avowed capitalist. Communism doesn't work. At least not as it has been tried throughout history. Even the Church dropped the experiment within the first

generation. But I am convinced that without the Christian understanding of charity, capitalism will go the way of Soviet communism and the Oneida colonies.

It is certainly possible to be a faithful, active Christian and a successful capitalist. It's very possible to be a very wealthy Christian, living fully into ones calling. But, I'm telling you, it's not easy. There is certainly an obligation that comes with wealth, however one defines wealth.

I don't think God wants us all to live a subsistence life. And, I don't think he wants everyone to be the same. I do think he wants us to share. I think he wants us who have, to care, genuinely care, for those who do not.

It's not a bad thing to have a silo filled with grain. But how much grain does one person need? I think Jesus wants us to open the grain door, at least once in a while, and share our abundance with those who lack.

As Jesus said in Matthew, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

May our hearts always be in the storehouse of God.