

Rev. Liz Hulme Adam
Tabor Presbyterian Church
October 10, 2021

Wealth
Psalm 22:1-15; Mark 10:17-31

The wealthiest of the wealthy, including world leaders, have been caught hiding their enormous wealth from taxation, investigators, creditors and the people of their respective countries. Legally so.

A whistleblower sounds the alarm alleging that Facebook puts profit before the common good.

LinkedIn cofounder Reid Hoffman told *The New Yorker* he thinks more than 50% of his "fellow Silicon Valley billionaires" have acquired some kind of doomsday hideaway spot in the US or elsewhere.¹ Bunkers, outfitted.

People like to protect what they already have, and the prospect of losing it motives people to protect themselves further. The wealthy have always been easy targets of disdain. Even the wealthy have been known to disdain their own. The point isn't to hate the wealthy or the wealth they accrue. Today's biblical lesson directs us to consider why wealth can separate people from the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus invites the wealthy man to do what would be enormously difficult for any of us, and I say that because we don't see the disciples here allying with Jesus against the rich guy. They can't themselves be wealthy, only, the story ends up incorporating them in, **as if** Jesus is talking not just to the rich man about the price of eternal life, but to them as well, such that Jesus says, *children, this is so hard*. That leads Peter to protest a bit - *we've left nearly everything to come follow you — are you seriously talking to us, too?!*

Two features stand out to me this morning about this story: the first is the specific detail that Jesus "loved" the rich man; and also, that he calls his disciples "children" as if tenderly, like, *"Here, here, I know hearing this is hard, but the new reality into which I draw you will be worth it."*

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/silicon-valley-doomsday-preppers-new-zealand-2020-3#linkedin-cofounder-reid-hoffman-told-the-new-yorker-he-estimated-that-more-than-50-of-his-fellow-silicon-valley-billionaires-have-acquired-some-kind-of-doomsday-hideaway-spot-in-the-us-or-elsewhere-in-the-world-16>

The rich man senses deep down that something escapes him - he has a lot of money, which brings with it status; he already has cache religiously, doing everything right. But still, he asks Jesus, what more can I do, to inherit this eternal life you embody?

Perhaps this man inherited money. It's not like he lived in a capitalist society where people could begin from below and work their way up. There wasn't fluidity among the classes in those days, and wealth, as we know, begets wealth. The rich get richer. If he inherited his wealth, he's used to it, and yet, he uses the word *inherit* here - how do I *inherit* something altogether different from what I already have?

We don't know this guy but we can imagine that his wealth helps him keep distant from what he doesn't like. Insulates him. Like the richest of our country — building shelters so what might happen to the rest of us won't happen to them.

Jesus doesn't take long to say indirectly what he's said elsewhere - you can't serve both God and mammon. You will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. (Matthew 6:24) It hadn't occurred to the rich **or** to the disciples - in giving we receive; in dying we are born to eternal life.

That's the Gospel that exceeds all the miracle stories. That's the true miracle, dying to one story to accept a new story. It's really quite impossible, on our own.

As it should be. We are products of our synapses, our DNA, our histories, traumas and temptations. What's good to know is hard to learn.

Who **can** be saved? - his own ask Jesus. Peter's attitude - "*What more do you want from us? You keep setting the bar higher and higher.*"

Jesus calms them down, assures them that their sacrifice will be rewarded. The reward isn't wealth, as we've come to understand wealth, but richness in another way. The richness of the kingdom has more to do with the common good than with the individual. We get the sense that both the rich man and the disciples have a "me" approach to all things spiritual. How do I gain eternal life? How do we as your disciples get to be

first in your kingdom? The new reality they're invited to share with Jesus means they will be accountable to everyone and there won't be divisions - as in, that one has, that one has not. In the new reality, everyone has, but it's not utopia, like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, "*where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.*" Neither is it - everyone has the same amount of money to equalize the playing field. It's a reality in which the suffering of one is the suffering of everyone, the joy of one is the joy of everyone.

The kingdom as Jesus embodies is not paradise. That would get boring in a New York minute. Even kids know if you get to have ice cream for breakfast, lunch and dinner, you eventually tire of ice cream. No, the kingdom has us experience the whole as parts, a desire to connect with each part. Solidarity with the parts that hurt. It's not a pain-free, suffering-free reality, at least on this side of heaven, which makes it a narrow gate, the eye of a needle, because not everyone wants to sign up for that kind of vulnerability. To love is to be hurt. The kingdom enlarges the scope to include, well, everyone.

That's what brings us to Psalm 22, what Jesus quotes as he suffers crucifixion. This Psalm describes the human condition in vividness. What is on that cross? Wretched aloneness.

It makes real for us that Jesus himself knows what it is to be us, in our anguish, in experiencing distance from God and others. On the cross divinity dies in solidarity with everyone who has ever suffered and died, before, now and into the future, the entirety of human existence in all its pathos: shared by divinity.

Suffering shared. The kingdom envisions a restructuring of society such that value, worthiness, richness, come from a shared existence, accountability for and to each other.

Our early stories have us leave the garden needing to cover up our nakedness, needing to carve out our way in the world, where we attempt to be gods ourselves, which always fails. Or we try to make other things a replacement for god, like the tower of Babel, or the wealthy with their bunkers — that will save us! We have Cain refusing to be his brother's keeper, killing him. Cain is the villain of the story, but he thinks he's a victim. In a way, Cain AND Abel tumble inside us as we wrestle with seeing

ourselves only as hero, or victim, never perpetrator or villain. We don't want to see ourselves in a bad light. To avoid seeing ourselves this way, we make others our enemy, when really, we are our own enemy.

In the kingdom, we are neither victim nor victor, we are not the heroes or the villains. What I see in you I also see in myself, what happens to you happens to me. In the kingdom of heaven we can't imagine winning if it means someone else losing.

If the rich man had complied, he would at first have felt deep loss. It would have been hard. What he would have found, and what he would eventually find no matter what, is that the other side of loss isn't oblivion and devastation, as we would expect. It's not claps either, of admiration and hero worship. It is community. On the other side of loss, we are picked up and dusted off, and resurrected, as it were, into community, into a shared existence that is far better than isolation.

Wealth isolates. It's a gated existence with a special code to get in. It makes us think we can make it on our own. But we can't.

Jesus felt so alone on the cross. We know a tiny fraction of that aloneness and we would never invite it or glorify it. But on the other side of aloneness, scorn, surrender, humiliation, death, on the other side of it always and forever is shared community, solidarity.

Why not take the risk in this life, why not try giving up our isolation on this side of living, to see if Jesus is right — that in giving up we gain, in dying to one reality, we gain another.

You know on some level what you need to give up. It may be money. It may be something else. Pride. Resentment. Jealousy. A grudge. Shame. Hurts you sooth with self-pity. Worry for the future. We cling to all kinds of stories as if they **are** our story, our identity. As if we are islands, alone acting out a soliloquy with our life, others, bit players.

The rich man couldn't imagine a different identity. He may have thought he'd lose himself if he gave up who he thought he was. Jesus loved him still. All things are possible through God. God is love, and love is never not available. Amen.