

Sermon for the 8th Sunday of Pentecost, Year C
31 July 2022
St. Matthew's Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit
Hos 11:1-11; Col 3:1-11; Lk 12:13-21

Have you ever heard the critique of Christianity that only the poor, the weak, and broken can believe it?

I recently finished reading a biography about Paul Farmer, a man who spent most of his life serving the poor in Haiti and the Congo. He was a medical anthropologist and physician, and co-founder of a non-profit called “Partners In Health”, which sought to revolutionize global healthcare by embracing the Gospel’s “preferential option for the poor.” Farmer died this year while working in Rwanda at the age of 62.

Farmer, by all accounts, was not a naturally religious guy *per se*, but he found the faith of the poor and ill around him impossible to ignore. He once said that if the poor have kept Jesus around then Christianity was probably a good thing.

And, so, Farmer lived an exhausting life in service to the poor, living among them as a friend. This was not a doctor doing a bit of *pro bono* work on the side to make himself feel better. Farmer lived a rather simple—if not hurried—life to serve them.

One memorial I read after Farmer’s death, was written by one of his friends, a Jesuit priest, who claimed that Farmer should be made a saint. Farmer himself once said that being a saint would, quote, “be a great thing to be,” but he didn’t want to be a saint for himself; he wanted to be one because he felt that the people around him needed him to be one. He wanted to be “holy” insofar as it placed him more squarely among the poor. Farmer was after something, but not just to be of some help either.

The faith of the poor is something the well-fed are often confused by. The idea is that with more wealth and health, faith would become unnecessary, so the well-off have a hard time seeing the faith of the poor as little more than a crutch to get them where they, the well-off, already are.

But this critique of Christianity is not lost on the Scriptures. The Bible has something to say about the rich, too. The Bible, more than any other moral issue, talks about money the most. Lest we think Scripture stops talking about this when we turn from the Old Testament to the New, here’s a line from 1 Timothy, which says:

Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains (1 Tim: 6:9-10).

Hard things to hear for sure. The Bible doesn’t say that being rich is wrong necessarily, but it is pretty straightforward that it is difficult to be both rich and faithful. It’s hard to be rich and faithful because wealth inclines us to forget about God and other people.

Jesus' response to the "rich fool" in Luke's Gospel suggests just this. Jesus is teaching his disciples when a man from the crowd interrupts him. He asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide his family inheritance with him. The man seems to believe Jesus has some authority over him and his brother, though it is unclear why he does. To the man's request Jesus says, "*who made me a divider over you?*"

Within Israel, though, inheritance laws were quite clear about how just these divisions could be done (e.g. Deut 21, 25; Num 27, 36; Judg 11, 1 Kgs 21; Ruth 4). According to Torah, brothers could share inherited land or they could divide it. In the latter case, the older brother received two portions while the others received a single portion of land. This means that the man is asking to separate the family estate so that he can get his piece of the pie. The brother's covetousness over the land he's already promised threatens to divide him then from his brother, but this doesn't seem to be of concern to him.

In his heart, then, this man is already divided against his brother. This is one thing riches can do. Riches can make other people seem like a threat to us. Once we have something to want, we might become suspicious of other people's motivations for wanting to become our friends. Maybe they want our stuff, or, maybe they just want to borrow a bit of my social capital by rubbing shoulders with me. So I might begin to build walls out of this distrust to protect myself from others' wants and to enjoy my self-sufficiency, all along becoming indifferent to the means by which my surplus continues to grow and possibly by exploitive means. So, from my material self-sufficiency comes the delusion of autonomy: but no one is an island.

Of course, the man isn't seeking to plunder someone else's possessions, but simply to gather his own portion of his inheritance. But it is just this that prompts Jesus to tell the man a story about a rich farmer who wanted to hoard the surplus of his fields. With an eye to good agribusiness, the rich farmer thinks to himself, "I'll tear down my storehouses and build bigger ones. Then, once I have it made, I'll take it easy!" But, God says to him, "You dummy! What's the use of your status and all this stuff if you are going die?" The man seems to simply be a shrewd businessman — no harm there. But while he's busy storing up his harvest he neglects to consider his brethren whose lives are dependent on what his fields have produced. So, to this the Lord says, "*Watch out! Beware of all greed.*"

Just as greed can sow division and indifference between us and others, so, too, can my material self-sufficiency lead to the delusion that I am independent of God; but, again, no one is an island.

With enough money, worldly anxieties can be put to rest. Finally, I can put up my feet up. Why bother with what cannot be bought? Like the forgiveness of sin. Why dare to have faith that can move mountains if one can hire hands to simply pull it down? Why seek eternal life when life can be made easy? Why learn to long for the rains of justice to fall down on my brothers and sisters when *my* current seat is perfectly fine? Why risk the boat? Why know a love that binds one to another if that Love reveals his face in those of the poor? Why risk loving that face, and learn to freely choose simplicity to be near them and, so, Him? Why worry about my soul if it cannot be bought?

Our lectionary reading then leaves us with a tone of judgement . We might be relieved to see that capitalists, carbon emitters, and, if we're feeling it, regular ol' rich folk, might have to face the fire, and, in having had our hatred of those who have what we do not confirmed, find ourselves content with a parable that doesn't seem to touch us. But that is just what Jesus warns about: not just greed, but all kinds of covetousness. How much would we like to have their spot? And, so, be free of this-worldly anxiety? I get it. We all do.

But, now, Jesus' interaction with the rich man actually interrupts a teaching about *just* this. Jesus has been talking to his disciples about ... anxiety. And anxiety does touch us, especially when it comes to material things. But even here we cannot content ourselves with a pseudo-theological reading of Jesus' commands that would have us say that God doesn't really care much about our possessions but just our inward attitude toward them. He wants us to be inwardly detached, but not actually dispossessed of them, we want to think. Again, we find ourselves faced with the same temptations as the rich. Alas, we find ourselves wearing the same proverbial shoe—I know I do—confronted with the same worries, albeit a more basic and natural one: that if only we had enough, we would be able to forget about our worries and go on. But, let us remember Jesus' warning, lest we forget about the Lord and about our brothers and sisters too. But, what if God actually does make a difference when it comes to these, our material worries?

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples to consider creation—consider the lilies and the sparrows—whose lives are well supplied. The flowers live, but do little of their own tilling, so what of the man whose pastures happened to yield greatly? If God sustains them who do nothing to sustain themselves, how much *more* does our heavenly Father care for us? Jesus has us consider God's character as the Creator, as One who desires to give good gifts to his children, so as to point us to the new Creation he is bringing about. So, before our anxious desires, the Lord wants to teach us to desire his Kingdom.

Jesus **warned** the foolish man who wanted to divide his inheritance, because our heavenly Father has given us an inheritance, a new life in him. Therefore, St. Paul exhorts us: “[let] *there be no divisions among you [so] that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose*” (1 Cor 1:10); *is Christ divided?* (v. 13). We are to then, as the Apostle tells us, “[to make] *every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: [for] there is one body and one Spirit, ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*” (Eph 4:3-6).

God has called us out of our former life of enmity—of **division** (hence, the brother's request in the passage)—and lead us to share in the inheritance awaiting us in God, that is, a share in God's own life, love, and care.

For, the Lord has held nothing back from us—he has not held himself back from knowing our anxieties, our grief, our hunger, our temptations; he took on a judgement meant for us; took on a death meant for us, so that he might give us the riches of the Kingdom, the gift of resurrection and of eternal life.

So then, those who believe share in the one life of Christ. And, because we do, we have been made to hold *all* things in common, sharing life's joys, burdens, and the stuff that makes for

each's daily bread, all through the power of God. We've seen this take place. In the book of Acts —the Gospel of Luke Part Two— we begin to immediately see the disciples begin to share with one another.

By Christ's cross and resurrection we have been made a new creation, thus the Church's practice of sharing is a kind of *economic* evidence of God's handiwork. Such generosity shows us the presence of the Kingdom.

This life of poverty and death—the one that we know—tempts us to hoard and even exploit one another; but, the life that the Lord gives makes possible a community that can share in the merits of that Body sewn for our redemption on the cross. That's why Jesus turns our attention to creation—to help us see the new creation and the new community Jesus is forming around himself to bear witness to the Kingdom, that one wherein the poor are particularly blessed.

So, the Bible was actually ahead of the current critique of popular religiosity: you know, the one we hear a lot these days that goes something like: “your thoughts and prayers are no good.” In fact, the Lord said it first, and repeats it throughout the Scriptures. For example, in 1 John 3:17-18 we hear: “*How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action*” (1 Jn 3:17-18; e.g. Hos 6:6, cf. Ps 51:16; 1 Sam 15:22; Prov 21:3; Jer 7:22-23; Ecc 5:1; Matt 9:13; Mk 12:33; Heb 10:4-10).

In short, **Money is a spiritual issue**. As Jesus says, “*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*.” That is why St. Augustine said, commenting on the parable we heard this morning, that “[The rich man] did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns.”

We are to “seek the things that are above” (Col 3:1), to desire the Kingdom. Through such acts of generosity and sharing, we come then to participate in Christ's risen life, the inheritance our heavenly Father has stored for us, and so attain to the One Body he has perfected. For, God has been unboundedly generous to us. We have seen him go to the cross; we have seen him raised, so we know that he is not holding back from us. So ask of him who gives freely, seeking what money cannot buy, but is the delight of your heavenly Father to give you by his grace.

And that brings me back to what Paul Farmer was looking for amongst the poor. I think he knew what we hear about in the book of James: that God has “*chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him*” (James 2:5). Of course, Christianity is scorned for its love of the poor and the weak, by those outside it; for such things mark the body of Christ and his cross, who is the embodiment of the wisdom of God, “a stumbling block” and “foolishness” to some, but salvation to those who believes (1 Cor 1: 18-25).

This is the dignity that Farmer saw in the poor, those he fell in love with, and dedicated his life too. These, importantly are not people without mortal concerns and neither are we. But what the faith of the poor showed him was something that often seems hidden to the well-fed, well-medicated and secure. The presence of the Kingdom.

Riches distracts us from our basic poverty and vulnerability, but this itself points us to our greatest dignity. This poverty and vulnerability is evidence of God's inscription on us that marks us as Christ's own, and calls out to us, something inside of us that our soul is just not at rest with until it responds and answers: "yes."

The Lord has called us to receive an inheritance, a life with him, a life he fulfills and makes whole, a life that can be shared because he is our supply, our abundance, our life. Therefore, let us store up treasure, not in our bank accounts or in our status, but in heaven by turning to our neighbors. That is how we come to see the Kingdom.

If you don't believe me, if you don't quite believe if this whole Gospel thing can be true, that it isn't just a crutch; maybe take a risk and try it out by sharing with your neighbor; maybe the Lord will show himself, in their face, the glorious inheritance for which you were created.

Amen.