

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WEALTH?

1 Kings 21: 1-16; Mark 10: 17-27

Some of us may own a big house; some of us may live in a small apartment. Some of us may drive a Mercedes; some of us may use public transit. Some of us may have lots of money in the bank; some of us may have lots of debts. But there is one thing that many of us have in common: we want more. But more of what?

Sometimes we have a clear idea and sometimes we don't. Some of us want to be free of debt. Then what? Sure it will relieve us of a pile of anxiety and that's good. We need help and blessed be the person or institution that can help us. But it won't free us from wanting more, because that is something that lives in us at a different level than money can satisfy. The reason I say this is that there are millionaires and billionaires that want more. They don't want more money. Goodness, they don't know what to do with the money they already have. No. They want other things – maybe power and recognition, maybe love, maybe attention, kindness and care, maybe more meaning and purpose because they're tired or bored or just at a loss. Wanting more, it's deep within us, whoever we are.

The ancient philosopher Plato uses an interesting image to describe human beings. He says we are like cracked pitchers. We can never get full because we leak. Whatever we fill ourselves with can never satisfy fully because there are cracks in us and we find ourselves experiencing an emptying of meaning, purpose and joy over and over again. What are we to do about this? How can we find some measure of fullness so that we are not always falling into a state of emptiness?

Let us consider our scripture readings. Both readings address these questions – Why do we want more? And what can we do about it?

First, our Old Testament reading. This is a story of the exploits of a notorious pair of rulers in Israel – King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Their claim to fame is that they are especially wicked rulers, out for their own gain to the neglect and oppression of their people. Also, as we can see from the story, Jezebel is the one who is the real boss. Where Ahab's conscience can make him insecure and hesitant about doing things to other people, Jezebel's hard-nosed ambition has no qualms doing what it takes to get what she wants. But will this satisfy their craving for more?

Ahab has a beautiful palace. It is surrounded by a beautiful garden. But he wants more land so that he can grow a bigger garden. The land next to his is much smaller, but it would make an excellent addition to his already large acreage. He asks the owner, Naboth, to sell the land to him. Ahab is willing to pay top dollar or get Naboth other land of equivalent or superior value.

Besides this, Ahab would be forever obliged to Naboth for his generosity. But Naboth is a modest fellow. He's not interested in better land or more money. He is committed to his small piece of land not so much for its monetary value, but its connections to his past. This land has been in his family for generations and he has the bones of his relatives buried on it. He cannot part with it whatever the price.

Well, that should be the end of the story, but it's not. Ahab wants the land so badly that he can't sleep or eat or do anything productive so distressed is he about it. Imagine, being so distressed because you can't have the property you want? How empty or unhappy do you have to be to get so obsessed over a piece of land? Sadly, people do it all the time, just like nations do it all the time. But instead of filling his emptiness by being a better ruler, developing deeper devotion to God and better relationships with his people, Ahab listens to Jezebel's council. What's that?

She says this: "Do you not now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." And true to her word, Jezebel comes up with a plan which involves getting false witnesses against Naboth and finding scoundrels who will do him in. By hook or by crook, by threats, intimidation and brute force, Jezebel will get Ahab what he wants. She will establish his kingdom even if it has to be based on fear and violence rather than honour and respect.

When those who are rewarded are liars and scoundrels, and when honour and integrity are trampled underfoot, how long can a kingdom last? Sadly as we see in the world, far too long and many innocent people who care about justice suffer and die. Ahab and Jezebel want what they want and they're willing to lie, cheat and destroy anyone who gets in their way. They are more concerned with their selfish desires to fill up all their cravings for more. Does this make them happy? Does it ever make them full?

The irony is that maybe if Ahab and Jezebel had paused before Naboth's ancestral commitments, maybe if they came to realize that some things are more important than money or the fulfillment of their own wishes, maybe if they came to realize that some relationships cannot be compromised or bought and sold, maybe then they would have found a better path to fullness.

Sadly, only when Jezebel dies and Ahab is killed do we see the results of their tragic hunger for more. It consumes them and many innocent Hebrews in the process. They end up with nothing but brutal deaths. When you set up your kingdom on fear and when all your relationships are based on threats and intimidation, then you can't trust anybody. Eventually you can be done in by the same practices you set up yourself.

And we don't even have to think of Ahab or Jezebel back in the 8th century before Christ. Think about rulers and regimes today, like Putin in Russia and others far and near, where force, threats, intimidation and fear rule. You get rid of all your potential rivals and those who don't agree with you. You create mistrust and suspicion until you can't even trust those closest to you. Eventually, you can be done in by those you never thought would turn their backs on you.

This has happened to empire after empire in world history. It happens in communities and families as well. How many fathers or mothers are profoundly hurt at the resentment or disregard their children carry toward them later in life. We may want to control our children or guide them more strictly out of fear for what can happen to them, and yet we can also be blamed later in life. Children who have not felt loved or understood in the way they have needed will have complicated relationships with their parents to the grave. I have witnessed this all too often at many a funeral.

So then, even those who seem to have so much often want more. Why? There is an emptiness within. Obviously, what they're getting filled with is not fixing the crack in the pitcher of their soul. It's harder to build good relationships than it is to make money. It's harder to build trust than it is to control others out of fear. It is hard work having to listen to your conscience and to accept criticism until you change your ways again and again. It's hard work allowing others to have their say and accepting decisions that are based on the preferences of others over your own. But this can fill up your soul in ways that having your own way never can.

It all starts from your relationship with God. If God has established your purpose as rooted in and out of love, and if love is sometimes about setting aside your way for the sake of making way for others in your life; and if love means you don't get even with others but try to find a way to talk to others and build bridges of reconciliation, even when you get burned at times; and if love means you work hard at paying attention to the concerns and frustrations of others and set aside some money and time to help others in need; if this is what it's all about well no wonder many prefer other more selfish ways to fill up the emptiness within.

But which way works better? I'm sure some of us are struggling with the answer. We're struggling because we know that the easier answer is not necessarily the right answer. I know this because it's my own struggle too.

It is also the struggle of the rich man in our gospel lesson. He's got it all, it seems. Jesus is impressed by his upstanding character. Whether wealth is gained through systems that are fair or unfair for many in our world, many who are wealthy are actually good people. We read that after this man came and asked Jesus in all sincerity for advice, Jesus "looking at him, loved him..." Now that's impressive. Obviously he was someone who was morally conscientious, for he comes to Jesus looking for ways to become a better human. But he is also troubled. He is

not happy. He may have lots of money and a great reputation among his own kind, but something fundamental is missing in his life and he can't quite nail down what it is.

But Jesus knows where the struggle is for this man – his many possessions. Well, Jesus tells him, you may be doing most all the right things, but you've got too much you're holding on to. Let it go and you will be free to give to God and to other human beings. You may have to live more modestly, but you will have riches within that lots of money and many possessions can never provide.

And the problem here is not just with this rich man. The problem is with all of us. This is why in the same passage we find the disciples taking issue with Jesus' teaching. They're not rich. Goodness, they've taken a leave of absence from their work just to follow Jesus, hoping for more out of their lives than what they've experienced thus far. But they, too, want more. Jesus tells them, the way to more is not paved with gold and silver, bigger and better.

The opposite is true, in fact. Unload the weight of things you are carrying; let go your attachments. It may be attachments to wealth, but it may also be to a certain lifestyle or dream. You may be a workaholic or obsessed with your body or your health or your children's success. You may be driven by a need to gratify yourself with perverse pleasures or other obsessions. You may be stuck in complaining about your grievances to whoever will listen as a way of getting attention. You may be miserable about getting older or having lost opportunities you think you deserved. You may be attached to certain perspectives about certain people who belong to a particular race, religion or sexual identity. You may have a certain image of success that you're striving after, or else depressed that you can never achieve it.

Jesus tells the man to give away his possessions, which are his attachments. Only then would he be free to follow Jesus into a different kind of life, a new way of thinking, open to change, to newness, to transformation of his heart, his mind, his commitments, his perspectives, everything that could give him fullness, the right way.

But it's hard. I know, it's hard. I struggle too. But God help me, God help you if you give up the struggle. God help you if you settle for less and if you get used to a certain bit of emptiness or dissatisfaction within you. God made you and me not for emptiness but for fullness. God made us so that we can be wealthy, but not wealthy with a big bank account or great recognition and applause from others. No. God made us so that we can be wealthy with love – love given and love received; love hard won through repentance, through forgiveness, through reconciliation after severe hurt, through rebuilding trust after experiencing betrayal, through working toward justice that refuses to step on my enemy.... Now all of this is hard, probably the hardest thing you'll ever have to do.... But just because it's hard doesn't make it any less worthwhile.

In fact, the opposite is true. As Jesus said in his famous sermon on the mount: The way is wide that leads to destruction and many go after it. But the way is narrow that leads to abundance of life and few are willing to take it. The harder the road, the more impact it can have in your life, the more it will establish itself in your character, nourish your faith and ground your soul.

May you and I follow the narrow road. May we go beyond morality to true following of Christ. May we begin to unload some of our many attachments that undermine our fullness, and free up inner space to be filled up with God-love – durable, resilient, but also tender and life-giving. On this Thanksgiving Sunday, may our thanksgiving free us to live more lightly, generously and with fullness in our hearts despite many things being as they are...

Let us pray: give me the strength to let go, O God, to open space within so that you can fill me with the fullness of your love... Amen.