

THE RICH AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Once upon a time, almost a quarter century ago, I was part of a congregation of tens of thousands when Pope John Paul II preached about the young rich man on the Boston Commons. I remember it well to this day. It was a gray and drizzly morning in October of 1979, but the Pope began by exclaiming, "I greet you, America the beautiful."ⁱ Soon he was explicating the story in today's gospel lesson.ⁱⁱ At the time I was a young lawyer and minister, providing free legal services to the poor on a church salary in a low-income neighborhood of Boston. So I was glad that the Pope had come to America the Beautiful, and America the Richest Nation on Earth, to talk about our obligations to the poor.

I'd become frustrated after four years of battling banks foreclosing on my clients' mortgages in economic hard times, hospitals refusing to provide free care to those with no money to pay, utility companies shutting off the heat in the middle of the winter when people were behind on their bills, big landlords evicting families whose breadwinner had lost his or her job, and welfare and social security administration offices tying up eligible recipients with bureaucratic red tape. I felt I was a prophet like Amos, crying out of the wilderness: "Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood...you [who] trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain: You have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine."ⁱⁱⁱ

That day the Pope did talk about America's obligations to the poor, both domestically and around the world. He spoke powerfully. Yet, he also started speaking very personally to me and everyone else on the Boston Common that day: What if I was a good person who had tried to follow the commandments not to steal, or bear false witness, or defraud anyone? The pope reminded me that when the rich man told Jesus that he'd kept the commandments since his youth, Jesus looked at him and loved him. The implication was that Jesus loved him for his sincerity as well as for his good deeds. I wanted to be loved by Jesus too.

Yet, then came the crux of the story: Jesus explains that the rich man lacks one thing in order to inherit eternal life: "Go, sell what you own, and give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."^{iv} The rich man is shocked. "What!" he must have been thinking. "Sell everything I own? That's what's required to follow in Jesus' footsteps? Really? How can I possibly do that? Can't I just keep my wealth, but make sure that I'm following all of the 10 commandments all the time?" You know what he ended up doing. He went away: "He...went away grieving, for he had many possessions."^v He didn't follow Jesus.

As I sat there on a wet blanket in the rain on the Commons, huddled under a poncho, I began to ask myself about my own life. Sure, I was doing some good works for the poor. Sure, I had some systemic knowledge and political awareness of what was going on in the Richest Nation on Earth, and I was trying to act on it daily. Yet, was I willing to sell everything that I personally owned and give the proceeds to poor in order to follow Jesus? I was on a church salary, but I had other resources. I had a car and a spacious apartment. I had money in the bank. I came from a family of means which had put me through college and two professional schools, and from which I might inherit more money someday. What would this mean for starting my own family?

Could I get married and have children? Jesus actually goes on in verse 29 of the 10th chapter of Mark to talk about leaving behind one's home, fields, brother and sister, mother and father, and even children for his sake and for the sake of the good news of the Kingdom.

So, as I sat there, thinking through the implications of what this prophet, Pope John Paul II, was saying to me, the Rev. Scotty McLennan, poverty lawyer, about what was truly required to follow Jesus, I began, shockingly, to cry. Just like the young rich man in the gospel story, I began grieving, openly and increasingly unashamedly, in the midst of the multitudes. For it was clear to me that I just couldn't sell all that I owned and give the proceeds to the poor. That seemed to mean that I couldn't be a disciple of Jesus, whom I take to be my Sovereign and my Savior. That seemed to mean I had no chance of inheriting eternal life. In a much more immediate way, it seemed to mean I was a hypocrite in my legal ministry to the poor: Give a little charitable service to those in need, sure, but maintain a comfortable lifestyle for myself. Pretty soon I was sobbing uncontrollably.

Last week Associate Dean Joanne Sanders in her sermon from this pulpit asked you simply to accept your own blessings, in the face of all of your anxieties. She admitted that accepting your own blessings might be hard while living here at Stanford or in the Silicon Valley in a pocket of wealth and affluence (recession or not). She knew that a number of you might feel a moral obligation to look beyond yourself to consider how to be a blessing to others. Joanne said, "You are right. But that is another sermon for another day." Well, today's that day.

So, I'm still sitting on the Boston Common, tear-stained, rain-drenched, and utterly miserable. "I greet you, America the Beautiful," the Pope had begun. I definitely didn't feel beautiful as a representative of America. But luckily the Pope was a pastor as much as he was a prophet that

day. He went on to the end of the gospel lesson, beyond the point where Jesus explains that "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God"^{vi} -- another passage that wasn't helping my grief. The disciples challenge Jesus at this point, asking who then can actually be saved. Jesus responds by saying, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."^{vii} The pope emphasized that God is love and that Jesus came with a special message of love.

Earlier in the gospel lesson, Jesus had looked at the rich man and loved him -- not just for what he had done, but for what he was trying to do. Presumably Jesus already knew that this man wasn't ready to sell everything and follow him.^{viii} Jesus loves him anyway. The rich man had not gone away angry, like many others who didn't like Jesus' answers throughout the New Testament. The young rich man had gone away sad. His sincerity was intact, even though he was not a saint. The Bible does seem to describe a "preferential option for the poor,"^{ix} and yet God's love, as manifested through Christ, is broad enough and deep enough to extend to rich people who are sincere, even if they aren't able to respond fully to what Jesus asks of them.

The paradigm case of a young rich person selling all, to follow Jesus, is St. Francis of Assisi. He grew up in the family of a rich cloth merchant. Then at the age of 22, he gave up every stitch of expensive clothing, and everything else he owned, to live a life of complete renunciation of worldly goods, trusting in God to provide for all his needs as he served his fellow human beings, animals and nature itself.^x Here's a link with Joanne's sermon last week. St. Francis took entirely to heart Jesus' words in his Sermon on the Mount: "Do not worry, saying 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink,' or 'What will we wear?'... Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."^{xi} It became very clear to me on

the Boston Common, however, that Scotty McLennan was a long way from being a saint, and probably never would be. Like the young rich man, I seek to follow Jesus, but in all sincerity I can't see my way to selling everything and leaving my family as well to do so. I hope and pray that God's embracing arms of love are wide enough to take me in anyway.

I certainly don't understand this to mean that I can forget about the poor, however. I recognize that I have a special responsibility, as do virtually all of us -- "to whom much is given is much expected"^{xii} -- to roll up my sleeves and be helpful, as well as to study and try to articulate the systemic and political reasons why poverty exists in America and in a globalizing world. At the time of my installation as the Stanford Dean for Religious Life early in 2001, I spoke about my vision of marshalling the unparalleled intellectual resources and pioneering spirit of this great university to address the growing worldwide disparity between rich and poor, starting here in the Silicon Valley. In conclusion, let me briefly mention four areas where I think all of us, without necessarily giving away everything we own to the poor, can make a real difference. I preach to myself here, as much as to you, because I worry about my own hypocrisy, fearing I'm becoming too complacent and comfortable at this wonderful university in sunny California.

First of all, you may remember that six students fasted for a week last spring, asking for a code of conduct for labor practices on campus, with special concern for the poorest of the poor who work here. They were addressing wage and benefit levels, working conditions for temporary employees at Stanford, and outsourcing of jobs. A presidential advisory committee with student and employee members was established to end the fast. The committee will present President Hennessy with recommendations this spring.^{xiii} I'm sure the committee will appreciate assistance

that any of us can provide with data, analysis, personal experience and suggestions.

Second, moving the locus of concern from the campus to the nearby community at large, the new Palo Alto Opportunity Center, which will provide housing and drop-in services for the homeless, is in the midst of a \$22 million fund-raising campaign. Here's a place for each of us to give money which will endow ongoing services to the poor within a half mile of the campus.

Third, on a state and national level, we need to understand and act upon the systemic and political reasons for increasing poverty in our country. According to a Northwestern University professor of economics, Rebecca Blank, who runs the Joint Center for Poverty Research, during the economic expansion of the 1980's real wages for workers in the poorest 10% of the population fell.^{xiv} Economist Barend de Vries, in a Georgetown University study, cites increasing inequities in distribution of wealth during the 1980's and the 1990's, so that by 1998 almost 60% of net wealth in the U.S. was held by the top 10% of families. During the 1990's, the richer families also reaped three-quarters of the nation's real income gain, while the bottom 60% of the population actually lost ground.^{xv} It appears that the recent tax cut championed by President Bush will average less than \$100 a year for the bottom 60% of taxpayers, while the tax cut will average over \$100,000 for the richest 1%.^{xvi} This, while welfare programs for the poor are being cut back. Good minds, such as those in this congregation, need to be applied to these economic realities, so that effective policy solutions may be found and implemented for the poor.

Finally, there's the problem of increasing worldwide poverty in the face of globalization. Again, it appears that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer -- in this case in developing countries.^{xvii} De Vries reports that more than a billion people worldwide, one out of five, now "live in the kind of abject poverty which makes human life hardly worth living."^{xviii} We

at Stanford must pay attention, and then be part of the solution and not part of the problem with the kind of policies we promote.

The prophet Amos, in a passage in the same chapter as this morning's reading, asks that "justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."^{xxix} He asks that we "seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so...the God of hosts will be with you."^{xxx} We may not be able to sell everything we have to benefit the poor, but we'd better be clearly committed to the needs of the poor and to making a real difference in their lives. Otherwise, the force of scripture - Hebrew Bible and New Testament alike -- drives in the direction of our disinheritance: "You have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine."^{xxxi} "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."^{xxxii}

NOTES

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- i. As quoted in "Seven Days," <http://www.sourdoughrecords.com/pope/sevendays.html>
 - ii. See Mark 10: 17-27
 - iii. Amos 5: 7, 11
 - iv. Mark 10:21
 - v. Mark 10:22
 - vi. Mark 10:25
 - vii. Mark 10:27
 - viii. New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 649.
 - ix. See the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter entitled "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy," Origins 16 (November 27, 1986).
 - x. New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 649; Jonathan Z. Smith (ed.), The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 367; Judith S. Levery and Agnes Greenhall (eds.), The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 303.
 - xi. Matthew 6: 31,33
 - xii. Luke 12:48
 - xiii. Eric Eldon and Anthony Ha, "Fast Ends As Students Reach Agreement with Hennessy," The Stanford Daily (June 4, 2003), p. 1; Barbara Palmer, "President's Advisory Committee on Labor Policies Announced; Students End Fast," Stanford Report (June 11, 2003), p. 1.
 - xiv. Rebecca M. Blank, It Takes Nation: A New Agenda for Fighting Poverty (Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 56.
 - xv. Barend A. de Vries, Champions of the Poor: The Economic Consequences of Judeo-Christian Values (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998), p. 21.
 - xvi. Ernest R. Grecco, "President Bush's Tax Cut Fails to Help Poor, Middle Class," Baltimore

Business Journal (July 14, 2003).

xvii. De Vries, Champions, p. 268.

xviii. Ibid., p. 2.

xix. Amos 5:24.

xx. Amos 5:15

xxi. Amos 5:11

xxii. Mark 10:25