

Which Way Wealth?
1 Timothy 6:6-19

September 25, 2016

19th Sunday After Pentecost

When I was a very young boy, my family and I went to a big museum either in Chicago or Milwaukee. I enjoyed seeing all the displays but I couldn't wait to get to what my favorite part of any museum: the gift shop. I was especially excited when we got there on that day because that gift shop was selling gold – big chunks of shiny gold – encased in plastic display cases. I had some money burning a hole in my pocket and begged my mom for some more money. I just had to have that gold. And when I got it, I was so happy. It wasn't until sometime later that I found out what I really got was iron pyrite – “fools' gold” as it is more commonly called. Although it LOOKED valuable, it really wasn't very valuable at all – at least not as valuable as real gold. After all it was fake gold.

In a sense, all money and worldly wealth are “fools' gold”. They look shiny, attractive, and valuable but it's not something that's real and lasting. In our world corrupted by sin, everything we have will be spent, consumed, broken, worn out, out grown, or lost. Worldly wealth just doesn't last forever. Paul reminds us in our text, “We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.” We come into this world poor and we will leave this world poor.

Yet we vigorously pursue wealth and possessions. This doesn't mean we all necessarily want to become billionaires or that we worship money like some sort of modern day Ebenezer Scrooge. We talk about money. We worry about money. We complain about money or lack thereof. When we do get money, then we go off and spend it on ourselves. We work hard to accumulate more and more possessions to have and enjoy. You really don't realize just how much “stuff” you've accumulated until it's time to move or clean out the house of a relative who has died. Yet it seems that we are rarely satisfied or content. Television ads tell us we need more and newer stuff. And we seem only too happy to pay attention to these ads and buy more.

You might ask, “What's wrong with that? Isn't that the great American dream?” There's nothing bad about money. There's nothing wrong with having stuff. The amount of money and stuff is not sinful. However, our attitudes toward money and wealth can be sinful and lead us into sinful activities. That's the danger.

Paul warns us about the danger of always wanting more stuff. He says, “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” You may say, “I don't want to be rich – just comfortable.” But let's face it: compared to the rest of the world and even to people in Bible times, everyone here IS wealthy. And that desire may tempt you to allow the accumulation or enjoyment of your possessions to get in the way of your relationship with God. Your wealth may become a snare in which it is in control of you rather you being in control of it. There are many senseless and harmful desires as you try to get more and more while thinking less and less. Debt can plunge you into ruin and destruction.

This desire (not the money and possessions themselves) can actually cause evil. The most misquoted Bible verse does NOT say, “For money is a root of all kinds of evils,” but “For *the love* of money is a root of all kinds of evils.” Paul says that the craving for money causes some people to wander from the faith and suffer many self-inflicted financial problems.

What's the solution? It's not more money or more stuff. A greater profit won't help. But a different kind of gain can. Paul says that godliness – that is, a pious life of faith – with contentment produces a great gain or profit. Even having just having food and clothing is enough to be content. Coming from our materialistic culture, we might wonder how it's possible to be content in such a poor situation.

We can be content in any and every situation because we are not poor like we think we are. We are rich beyond our wildest dreams. We just don't know it or fail to remember it. God has made us rich for Jesus' sake with a wealth that all the money on earth cannot buy. The Word of God says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8:9)

Jesus came to this planet with all of the wealth of heaven: holiness in the presence of God, true and everlasting life, and the kingdom of heaven that lasts forever. He came, not to lord it over us with His divine superiority or to tease us with His wealth as we lay in our spiritual poverty, but to make a trade – a

trade that made no sense for Him and benefited only us. He came to trade the wealth of heaven for our poverty. The Word of God describes it this way: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Jesus took our sin becoming sin and gave us the forgiveness He earned by dying on the cross. He took our death and gave us life which death cannot touch by rising from death and the grave. He took our hell by being separated from His Father on the cross and gave us heaven – a home in the presence of God from which we can never be separated for all eternity. In our connection to Him through Holy Baptism, we are the righteousness of God.

We are truly rich with the true and lasting wealth of God and not the false and fleeting “fools’ gold” wealth of this world. We didn’t deserve it. We couldn’t earn it. We were not able to buy it. We simply have received it as a gift of God’s grace. As a result, we are the truly wealthy ones on this earth.

Therefore, does it make any sense to love the wealth of this world? To pursue the wealth of this world? To get caught up in the mad acquisition of possessions and the hectic priorities that come with them? St. Paul’s advice in our text to young Timothy is appropriate for us as well, “But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” In other words, flee from the love of money and possessions which are only temporary and can be pleasing to your body but cannot save your soul. Pursue those gifts of God – such as righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness – which are eternal and can benefit both body AND soul. Continue on in faith (which can be a struggle at times) and hold on to the eternal life to which you were called on the day of your baptism and confirmation when you made the good confession of faith in Christ Jesus.

Does this mean we should all sell our possessions, give the money to the poor, and live in a desert or monastery? No. Not at all. Money and possessions are not evil and not the problem. Our attitudes are evil and are the problem. They need to be changed. The power of the Holy Spirit working in us through the Word of God and the Sacraments can change them.

First, St. Paul says we are not to be haughty and think our wealth and possessions come by our work and hard effort and belong to us. Be humble and recognize that all we possess is a gift from God and still belongs to Him, to be used for His purposes.

Second, do not depend on riches for your present and future welfare. Place your faith for the present and your hope for the future in God and the eternal wealth He has so freely given to you – forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation in heaven.

Third, enjoy what God has given you. That’s not wrong or sinful. God has richly provided us with everything to enjoy, the text says. But enjoy everything within the context of your life with God, not apart from it as many do. Recognize all of your wealth and possessions as God’s gifts, not as your own accomplishment. And, as you enjoy God’s gifts, receive them with thanksgiving to Him.

Finally, be wealthy in another way. Be rich in good works, Paul says. Do not use your wealth and possessions only for your own personal enjoyment. But always be generous and ready to share with those in need. Use your wealth and possessions to serve your neighbor’s needs and provide for *their* enjoyment in your family, your church, your school, your place of employment, and your community.

Being rich in faith and rich in good works and not just rich in money and possessions, Paul says, will store up true treasure for you. It will provide a good foundation for the future so that you can take hold of what is really life: faith in and thanksgiving to God and service and care for our neighbors.

Many people think that there’s only two directions you can go with money and wealth in your life. Either you can choose to accumulate as much wealth as you can and spend your life enjoying it all or you can choose to divest yourself of wealth and spend your life not having much fun. The first scenario is based on the notion that wealth and possessions are all there is to life or, at least, the most important thing in life. The second scenario is based on the notion that wealth and possessions are sinful or, at least, not very spiritual. Neither is true.

Instead, receive, by faith, the true wealth that God gives you in Jesus Christ: forgiveness, new life now, and eternal life in the future in heaven. Place all of your hope and confidence in these. Receive, with thanksgiving, the earthly wealth that God gives you here: money and possessions. Use them for your needs. Enjoy them for your pleasure. Share them with your neighbor. That’s the way for wealth to flow. Amen