

More than Stuff

sermon digest

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Mark 10:17-27

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Minister to Harvard Peter Gomes offered a parody on our Gospel story:

'A young Jewish yuppie has everything; he wants, as most yuppies want, more. He wants to be perfect. Jesus says he can't be. The yuppie finds one thing that money cannot buy. Jesus gives him his moral comeuppance, and more than this, Jesus says that all yuppies, or all Jewish yuppies in this context, will have a hard time getting into heaven.' End of story, moral clear, you can take that home to lunch.

(Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, 56)

Speaking to a Harvard congregation in the 1990's, Gomes could assume that everyone understood the term *yuppie*. An acronym for Young Urban (or Upwardly-mobile) Professional, the word was coined in the early 1980's and employed by the media to describe the phenomenon of young, financially secure, upper-middle class, business professionals who clustered in large cities. The term eventually referred to materialist, self-centered, shallow, 20 to 30-something, middle-management executives characterized by the spiritual and intellectual vacuum of modern materialism.

In *Time* (April 8, 1991), Walter Shapiro wrote a mock obituary "The Birth and—Maybe—Death of Yuppiedom" suggested by the 1987 economic recession. He offered a poetic eulogy: "Let not ambition mock their frivolous ways,/ Their pricey joys and consumer craze./ Nor grandeur hear with a disdainful twitch/ The short and selfish annals of the nouveau rich."

Shapiro traced yuppie roots to the prosperity of the 1950's and 1960's and a sense of generational entitlement among the baby-boomers. He attributed the cause of fiscal death to "family, finances and fatigue" but conceded that materialism will in some fashion continue to fill empty lives. The article ends with a new take on an obituary "in lieu of flowers": "no need to send flowers. Checks made out to cash will do just fine."

Are rich people by definition evil? All three Gospels report the encounter immediately following the story of Jesus and the children with the declaration: "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Craddock views the stories of the children and the rich young ruler as illustrations of the point in 18:14: "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Thus, the rich young ruler is a story of arrogance that needs to be deflated.

Gomes has the opinion that we Americans love success stories, but we don't really like successful people. He elaborates a bit, "These are the people who have it all, who know it all, and who tell us all about it in endless, endless prose. Who, I ask you, really likes Donald Trump? Who is not annoyed by Martha Stewart?" (*ibid*)

Bible professor Joseph Hellerman compares the attitude toward wealth in modern America and Roman Palestine (*Trinity Journal*, fall,200, 143-164). He notes that the average American attributes wealth to hard work and/or good fortune and identifies poverty with lack of initiative and/or opportunity. Americans think of economic resources as unlimited; there is always more wealth to be acquired. Poverty comes from bad luck, low effort, and social discrimination.

In contrast, Palestinian Jews in the Roman world perceived a culture of limited resources that must be shared either equitably or unfairly. No one can have it all. The wealthy are either favored by God, or they have managed to get ahead by defrauding the weak. The poor are either out of God's favor or exploited by the powerful.

Actually the rich man in story is a rare bird. Most of the wealthy and powerful at the time of Christ had worked their way to the top through compromise and cooperation with the Romans. Rich publicans (tax collectors) were hated not because they were rich but because they had sold out to the enemy. Almost no one was able to get on top in that world with virtue intact. The rich and the powerful were spiritual and political prostitutes.

However, the rich young ruler is by Jewish standards a righteous man. In light of his easy affirmation of the Decalogue, he would be the model for any young Jew to imitate and an example of how God rewards virtue. He is not an aristocrat flexing economic and political muscle, demanding ecclesiastical service from the rabbi. He comes in humility, kneels in respect (Mark), addresses respectfully the "good rabbi" and asks, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He does not expect

anything to be given to him or demand that the servant class do the work. He is used to earning his way. Has he not proven his true righteousness with his unimpeachable character and his envied station in life? A high standard of moral and ethical values is not a small matter.

Knowing as we do that life has an end as well as a beginning and that all of us eventually leave behind the things that we accumulate the question comes down to this: Is there anything more? Is there a spiritual reality in life that should change my view of things? Can we have it all?

Can I have it all? Whether or not the man in the Gospel story fits the stereotype of the modern yuppie, the picture presents us with the age-old question that we face as children, “can I have my cake and eat it too?” In concert, the Gospels report that the man had it all—status, wealth, and youth—thus, the composite identity, “rich young ruler.” But, he was not satisfied that he had it all. He wanted what we are told from childhood that you can’t have, your cake and eat it too; he also wanted to take it with him. He wanted this life to go on forever. We can beat up on the guy because he is rich, call him a yuppie and click our tongues that he was just too stuck to his lavish lifestyle to follow Jesus; or, we can recognize a problem of our age that life demands choices, that many of our options are mutually exclusive. In other words, you can’t have it all.

In Louisville, Carolyn was working with preschool children one Sunday morning. Although all of the chairs in the room were identical, two of the five-year-old boys began to push for the right to occupy the same chair. Assuming the role of Queen Solomon, Carolyn asked the boys to please stand up while she helped them to decide which chair to occupy for the morning. She took both chairs out of the room so that they would lose sight of the coveted chair. Then she brought both chairs back into the room, gave each of the boys an identical chair, and said, “now you can sit down.” The boys were shocked and confused enough to give up their fight, and the class continued. However, we were amused to get a child’s-eye view of this conflict. One of the boys told his grandmother later about the incident and assured her that Mrs. Dipboye had given him the “good” chair. He had “won.”

In a world of unlimited resources, everyone can be rich. Only the lazy are poor. We can continue to expand our gluttony and pollute the air with out carbon-based fuels. The only choice we have to make is the best route tot the top. But that scenario is getting harder to sell. A few months ago NASA scientist Les Johnson spoke at our Forum on Religion and Science. After making a case for the limited resources on planet earth he offered the rather farfetched suggestion that we need to look ahead at the possibility of mining our future resources in space.

If we can’t have it all, what shall we do with what we have? Jesus made an astounding suggestion: “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Even the disciples who had left their homes to follow Jesus (v. 28) were shocked.

We should not be surprised. Wealth can be a problem, however much it may be a problem most of us would like to tackle. Former pastor of Oak Ridge First Methodist Church, Bishop Ken Carder viewed the whole story as a case study in “The Perils of Riches” (*Christian Century*, Sept 24-Oct 1, 1997, p. 831). He observed:

Wealth becomes addictive. Luxuries become necessities. As one who remembers life without indoor plumbing, television, computers, telephones, VCR’s and microwaves, I know how easily things once considered luxuries of the few become necessities for the masses. Yet in terms of the world’s population, such luxuries-turned-necessities are available to only an affluent few.

A big question looms here: was Jesus suggesting that the man get his wealth out of the way so that he could live in poverty with Jesus, or was he actually thinking of the justice involved in lifting the life standard of the poor?

Kingdom economics suggests a little of both. Originally the combined Luke-Acts document was viewed as a whole by the same author. Luke is known for his defense of the poor and oppressed and concern for economic justice in the world. In Acts, Luke describes what has become known as early Christian communism: (4:34-35) “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”