

The Gospel of Wealth
Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

I'm going to talk about money this morning. To start off, I stole the title of this sermon from an Essay by Andrew Carnegie, that 19th. Century capitalist who made a fortune, held on to it tenaciously, even letting his partner employ violence to crush the homestead strike, and ensured that his name would be remembered for the founding of libraries. In brief, Carnegie argued that obtaining and possessing wealth brought with it moral responsibility to use that wealth for the common good. He was aware that merely trying to distribute wealth more equitably probably would not work. I remember a comic strip episode of "Little Orphan Annie" in which Daddy Warbucks explains that should he give away all his vast wealth equally to every person in the world each person would have a pittance and within six months he would have earned it all back. Carnegie was not so blunt but he understood that giving money to the poor is a tricky matter.

People come to First Parish seeking help and we try, with the help of Jane Newhall to see that they are connected with agencies that can help them and we provide vouchers for food, fuel, and other necessities. Generally we do not give out money. Too often money given in such direct charity goes to feed addictions or is spent foolishly leaving the person still in dire straits. Everyone has heard the comment "give a hungry man a fish and he will be

hungry in a few hours, teach him to fish and he will never be hungry.” Most of our outreach and mission work proceeds on such principles seeking whenever possible to move beyond emergency aid to making structural changes which will lead to a better life.

Some recent studies of third world economies have found that in places where there are significant natural resources such as oil, the influx of those virtually unearned revenues simply enrich a minority or corrupt the society but do not lead to a better standard of living for most of the people. We see the same phenomenon wherever Casinos and other forms of gambling are touted to bring in easy money. A few get rich and most suffer loss.

The whole point of all this is to emphasize what Jesus told the man we call the “rich young Ruler”. The man is a worthwhile person. Asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, he is told to obey the commandments. Always a good place to start. No amount of philanthropy will excuse doing evil. The young man is clear about his personal character. He has tried diligently all his life to obey the commandments. *I say he has tried*, but the text has him claim that he has succeeded. This man is one for whom Jesus easily felt love and concern. But Jesus did not simply approve of him and send him on his way. He did not give him an easy commendation and back away from possibly hurting his feelings.

This is where we preachers can sympathize. I know a lot of colleagues who are reluctant to talk with their congregations about money because they feel that people may be hurt or offended. After all, we live in a culture where it is more acceptable for people to talk about their sex life than their bank accounts (except to complain about the market or to boast about good investments, or a lucky pick at the track.) I do not watch most of the trash talking shows on TV where people come in and complain about their bizarre relationships but it is clear that they almost never are talking about how they either handle their money responsibly or use it for the common good. More often they are talking about someone else's moral faults and bad habits. So, for us, talking about money is rather like the Victorian taboo about talking about the human body, let alone sex.

Some good religious folks have the idea that “money is the root of all evil” and that because the Bible so characterizes it, we should have as little as possible to do with money. That sort of anti-materialism lies behind the colonial structure of church governance where the Parish handled the money and the material things and the “elect” members of the Church handled the spiritual matters. The text in 1 Timothy 6:10 does not quite say that “money is the root of all evil” however, it says: *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. Money itself is merely a convenient counter, a means by which value is assessed and traded.

The **love** of money is often a corrupting matter. Now, I do not know many people who love money. I know a number of folks who are fearful about their personal security and who worry that they do not have, or will not have, enough money. I know people who have made bad investments or choices, wasted opportunities or resources, or simply had bad fortune and who are therefore worried about how they will pay the bills which are coming due. I know people who have perhaps missed the point made by a bumper sticker I saw the other day which read “*the best things in life are not things*” I think we have all occasionally fallen into the trap of thinking that some new toy, or tool, or trophy would finally make us happy and help us feel successful and worthwhile.

I want to tell you that what really makes a man or woman rich and worthwhile is what we are able to give away and what we leave behind us when we go. In the epistle to the Hebrews we are told that “*the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*” We are reminded that Jesus Christ has fully tasted life and death on our behalf and is therefore able to judge us both with rigor and with

mercy. Our faults and rationalizations are often clearer to God than they are to us. God loves us anyway and asks that we take as responsible a role in life as we are able, today.

First Parish Church is in the midst of a Stewardship commitment drive. As a parish minister I have lived through a lot of such programs and there is always a temptation to sidestep the question of “how much should I give?” If you are like me, you do not like having anyone telling you what you should do. So I’m not going to tell you what “your fair share of our church budget would be” nor am I going to talk about tithing or percentage of gross income which *should* go to charity including the Church. Instead I want to take a leaf from the behavior of Jesus and the apostles who were not afraid to talk of money but who tried to keep it in perspective as a means of doing good, showing charity and demonstrating where our real treasure lies.

The rich young ruler was not bad for being rich but he, unfortunately showed where his real commitment lay when he went away sorrowing because Jesus urged him to give his wealth to the poor. The Pharisees in Luke 16 who quibbled over Jesus’ comment that you cannot serve God and wealth were reminded that God knows where our real loyalty lies. In Hebrews 13 we see a reminder that we can seek to free ourselves from the love of money because God will never leave or forsake us.

For me the fundamental question of giving to charity and especially giving to the church is a matter of deciding how committed I am to the cause, how much I have over and above my realistic basic needs (a trickier calculation to be sure) and how much I want to strengthen my relationship with God. If I come to love and trust God more I might be able to love and care about my neighbor more and in the process find that I am better able to love myself. In short, if I can find a sum or percentage which represents what I could reasonably share with others. If I take it off the top so that I am not tempted to use it like a “cash reserve” (see 1 Corinthians 16 *every week, each of you put aside and save whatever extra you earn so that collections need not be taken when I come*) and I try to choose causes I believe will effectively do God’s will and spread God’s love and care among my neighbors, both near and far, then I may be able to give responsibly. For me, most of those causes are Church connected and I therefore pledge in some proportionate way to those churches of which I am a part. If I give enough, I feel good. (If I am stingy about it, I feel stingy) It is as simple as that. I suggest giving till it feels good. If you simply give till it hurts everybody gets shortchanged. If all this seems to raise some difficult questions and choices, I go back to where I began. Even with vast wealth Carnegie found it difficult to figure out how to give effectively so that good would result and

so that he could feel good about himself. Those of us who are middle class do not have it any easier.