

“God/Wealth/Us”

First Presbyterian Church
November 15, 2020

Matthew 6:24-27

Joseph Heller, the author of *Catch-22*, was at a party in the Hamptons. A guy came over to him and pointed at a young, 25-year-old who worked for a big investment firm. He said to Heller, “See that guy over there? He made more money last year than you will ever make with all of your books combined.” Joseph Heller said, “Maybe so. But I have one thing that man will never have.” His friend was skeptical, saying, “Oh yeah, what?” Heller said, “Enough.”

Having enough; it’s what Jesus is talking about in today’s New Testament lesson. It’s hard to feel like you have enough these days, no matter how much you have. Always has been.

When Jesus was teaching in Galilee and Judea, he undoubtedly knew the great wealth that some people had. And he certainly knew the terrible poverty that many suffered. Looking at that, wouldn’t you expect Jesus to preach a gospel of redistribution of wealth? Wouldn’t that solve everything? If the wealthy just gave more to the poor, the world would be returned to the paradise God created, wouldn’t it?

No. Jesus talks a lot about wealth and he talks a lot about poverty. And in all his teachings, his focus is on faith in God and love of neighbor. When it came to the redistribution of wealth – giving to the poor – Jesus had a bigger vision. What Jesus wanted was the redistribution of love and devotion.

Jesus cared for the wellbeing of the wealthy as much as he cared about the poor. It grieved him deeply that some people were more devoted to money than to God. And it caused him great sorrow to see people worrying about their lack of money more than about their lack of faith.

The funny thing is – the great thing is – that if we would put our devotion to God – our faith in God – ahead of our worry about money, both the wealthy and the poor would have all they could ever hope for or imagine.

That’s how valuable – and powerful – our faith in God can be, should be, if we allow our faith to guide us and sustain us. The problem is, we live in a world that values wealth and money over service and faith. It’s the same type of world Jesus was born into some 2,000 year ago. But our world has something that world did not, at least not fully. Our world has Jesus and his living word.

“No one can serve two masters,” says Jesus, “for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.” And then to make sure we know what he’s talking about, Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Obviously, Jesus is talking to the wealthy here, those people with enough money to take care of themselves and their family, and then some. If you’re wealthy it doesn’t matter how much money you have. Anybody with a little extra is going to look at the extra money they have and wonder if it’s enough – worry that it’s not enough.

It’s like the old miser who was called on by the chairman of the community charity. “Sir,” said the fund-raiser, “our records show that despite your wealth, you’ve never once given to our charity.” The man replied, “Do your records show that I have an elderly mother who was left penniless when my father died? Do your records show that I have a disabled brother who is unable to work? Do your records show I have a widowed sister with small children who can barely make ends meet?” “No, sir. Our records don’t show those things.” “Well,” said the old miser, “If I don’t give to any of them, why would I give to you?”

It doesn’t matter how wealthy you are. Anybody with a little extra is always going to wonder if it’s enough – worry that it’s not enough. And that grieves Jesus, because he knows the love that God has for us and he knows God will always provide for our needs, always carry us through, in times of plenty and times of want.

“Therefore,” says Jesus, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” Now here, Jesus is primarily talking to the poor who suffered need of food and clothing, but he’s also talking to the wealthy. Worry is worry, after all, whether you’re worried about making your next million, your next car payment, or your next meal.

The point is, Jesus doesn’t want us to let wealth – or lack thereof – get in between us and God. So he seeks to free us from worry by pointing us toward God. “Look at the birds of the air,” says Jesus. “They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” Have you ever looked at a bird sailing through the sky and been a little envious? Boy, I have. Not a care in the world, right? How do I get me some of that?

Well, the answer is faith; faith in God and trust in the Lord. We worry because we trust the world more than we trust God. It’s an incredible temptation – trusting in ourselves instead of God. And just like with any temptation, it takes constant vigilance to steer clear of it, and it takes faithful practice to overcome it.

We overcome our worry about not having enough – not being enough – by realizing that in God's eyes, we are more than enough, and in God's providence, we have everything we need, if we put our trust in God.

Each of us has been given an abundance of love and life by God, to use for God's good purpose and our inner sense of joy and well being. If we are truly devoted to God – over and above our worldly fears and temptations – than those fears and temptations become less and less, and with God's help, they disappear entirely, and we are at peace with ourselves and all the world.

Next Sunday is pledge Sunday, which means this week is worry week, at least for those who take the time to prayerfully consider what they will give to the church, what they could give. What God would have them give.

If you give it some thought – whether to pledge or not, whether to give a little more or not, whether to give a little less – if you give it some thought, you will worry about it. You'll either worry you're not giving enough or that you're giving too much, that you won't have enough for your needs.

Folks, it's not worth worrying about, even though I worry every year, just like anyone would who really gives it some thought – how much to give. And every year, I come to the same conclusion – it's not worth worrying about.

The Bible says give 10 percent to the church. And I know that's not easy to do. The more you have the bigger that number is, and it can be hard to write a big number on that pledge card. The less you have, the smaller that number is, and with small numbers it's easy to think they don't matter, what you give doesn't matter.

The truth is, whether you give a lot or a little, it matters. It matters to God, because God loves you, and God wants you to love him and trust in him more than money, so that, as Jesus said, you "don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink." Not worrying; that matters to God.

And it matters to you – to us as individuals – because when we set aside our worries and trust in God, we come to realize that it's not worth worrying about, that in God's eyes we are more than enough, and that in God's providence, we have everything we need to cultivate an inner sense of joy and wellbeing, a sense of joy and wellbeing that money can't buy.

There's only one true source of that type of joy and wellbeing, and that source is not our bank accounts, but rather our faith in God, and our devotion to the Lord, as reflected in our boldness to put it on the line for Jesus. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord God, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us – for daily food, for health, for each breath we take, for freedom to choose, and for the gifts of your word, your power and your love.

Our hearts are truly overwhelmed, O God, when we consider how you have entrusted so much to us. May we be worthy of that trust. May we be a people who are unafraid to live as fully and as richly as you want us to live.

Help us, O God, as followers of Jesus, to multiply all that you have given us, to risk spreading your word and perhaps see it misunderstood, to love those whom others think worthy only of hate, to take chances by doing good to those who have not done good to us.

Make us people who share in both word and deed that which you have given to us.

We pray for the church gathered today, both here and around the world, that it may encourage all of its members to discover, develop and use all their gifts to your glory.

We pray for those who are poor in body or in spirit, for those oppressed and heavy laden, for those in grief, for those dealing with illness and disease, and those others we lift up to you now in the silence of our hearts.

Minister by your Spirit – and by our care and concern – to all those for whom we have prayed, and help us walk faithfully in the path of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**