



“WISE UP...ABOUT WEALTH”

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Scripture: Proverbs 11:23-31

*The desire of the righteous ends only in good;
the expectation of the wicked in wrath.
Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.
A generous person will be enriched,
and one who gives water will get water.
The people curse those who hold back grain,
but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it.
Whoever diligently seeks good seeks favor,
but evil comes to the one who searches for it.
Those who trust in their riches will wither,
but the righteous will flourish like green leaves.
Those who trouble their households will inherit wind,
and the fool will be servant to the wise.
The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
but violence takes lives away.
If the righteous are repaid on earth,
how much more the wicked and the sinner!*

Tom Long tells about a seminary student of his years ago who went home for Christmas. The student's father was the pastor of an urban congregation and lived in the neighborhood. They went out for a walk and talked about the typical urban challenges of poverty, healthcare, housing, employment and so on. They lamented the decline of public services and private property in the area and celebrated the mission of the church to bring life in the midst of death. As they neared the end of their walk, they realized that they were hungry and decided to stop at a pay phone to order a pizza that would be delivered about the time they got home. Remember pay phones?

Just then a homeless man approached them. “Spare change?” he asked. The pastor reached into his pockets and took out two handfuls of coins. “Here. Just take what you need,” he said. Unaccustomed to this response, the man said, “Well, I guess I’ll take them all.” He raked all the coins from the pastor’s hands and put them in his pockets.

The father and son turned to go their way to the pay phone but had taken only a few steps when they realized they’d just given away the change they needed to make the call. So, turning around,

the father said to the same homeless man, "Pardon me, sir, I need to make a phone call. Can you spare some change?" The homeless man thrust his hands into his pockets and came out with two handfuls of coins. "Here," he said, "just take what you need."

When we are young, our world often seems black and white. Either something is right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral, ours or not ours. As we gain life experience and mature in our faith, however, most of us see much more gray, especially when we try to make sense of tragedies such as the horrific mass killing in Orlando a week ago. When we get to the heart of any matter of importance, there is almost always paradox. For we discover that things which seem contradictory are actually intertwined and related.

Jesus' teachings exemplify that paradox. The first will be last. The poor will be rich, and the rich will be sent empty away. We are blessed when we go to the back of the line. Saving becomes losing and losing becomes saving. By bearing the cross, we gain the victory.

It's sometimes called the Law of Paradoxical Intent. That is, the harder we try to achieve something, the further away the goal becomes. And when we aren't obsessively trying to reach some desired result, it often falls right into our lap. The spiritual writer Richard Rohr calls it "falling upward." Failure becomes the crucible for spiritual growth.

Our proverbs this morning remind us that this same principle of paradoxical intent applies to our wealth and our possessions. "One person gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. A liberal person will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered. He who trusts in his riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf." How paradoxical!

The paradox of wealth is that our world becomes larger and larger when we are generous and invest our gifts and resources in helping others. It's the wise man's paradoxical opinion that the more we give, the more joy, hope and love we'll have. On the other hand, the more urgently we hold on to what we have, somehow we end up impoverished and diminished in spirit. In this aspect of King Solomon's thought, Jesus would have been in complete agreement. It takes a bold faith in God to live generously. And it takes a strong faith to surrender our hard earned wealth. We receive by giving, and we grow by giving.

That's actually a basic law of economics. We don't get money by hoarding it or spending it, but by investing it. We don't grow muscles by letting them atrophy but by using them. Gary and I are constantly reminding our three young adult children of the importance not only of saving part of their income and investing it wisely so they can reap the benefit of compound interest, but also of giving away a portion of what they have.

The insanity of the miser is not simply that he loves money, but that he loves it so poorly and doesn't understand it. A miser thinks that money is something to be piled up and stared at. But when it's not invested, it simply begins to shrink.

If you and I are going to wise up about wealth and if we desire to grow spiritually, we have to figure out what to do about our money. It's the same way with all of life's resources: our brain,

our voice, our personality, our love, our education, our skills and our passions as well as our money. Paradoxically, our resources only increase when we offer to others what we have. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 24: “The world of the generous just keeps getting larger and larger, while the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller. The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed, those who help others are helped.”

You know what I am talking about because you are an amazingly generous congregation, always willing to offer what you have in service to the world. There is a couple here at the church whom I will call Sally and Tom. Sally and Tom are deeply faithful disciples of Jesus Christ who are not what many people in this area would call well off. Yet their world keeps getting larger and larger because of their generosity. Sally has been talking with me about sponsoring the outreach of a United Methodist pastor and congregation I know in another country where there simply is no money and no resources for ministry.

She said, “Tom and I each set aside our personal spending money every other week. What is left over from personal expenses goes to charitable causes. We each decide where ours will go. This is over and above our annual estimate of giving. Sometimes we pool our funds. I tend to look for long term causes because I dislike having to continually vet new causes. I can send at least \$50 a month for a year, depending upon my expenses. Some months may be greater. We are also committed to \$50 a month for our refugee family. We have already paid for four months and expect to continue through this year.” Sally and Tom are wonderful examples of faithful disciples who, by blessing others, are abundantly blessed themselves.

But the wise man has another paradoxical insight with which Jesus would have been in agreement. Verse 28 says, “Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves.” If we trust in riches, the writer of Proverbs says, we will wither and die, but those who live “rightly” will flourish and grow like a powerful tree. To put it another way, money will not take the place of character. Money will succeed for a while, but eventually a showdown will come, and then character will take the day.

Now the Hebrew word for “righteous” is not strictly a religious word. That is, it is not a synonym for pious. As the Old Testament writers used it (and as you would find it used still today in Israel), righteous means quite literally to do things in the right way. As far as the Jews were concerned, the right way was not only the moral way, but it was also to be intelligent and to obey the rules that hold together the universe God created. If you want to be righteous, the wise man says, do what is right before God. Don’t always be thinking about getting ahead or making a quick buck or satisfying your own desires, but ask yourself what is the right, honorable and grace-filled thing to do.

Forbes magazine recently released its 2016 list of the top ten billionaires in the world. This 30th annual list features 1,810 billionaires around the world with a total net worth of almost \$6.5 trillion. In case you’re interested, this year marked the first time the average net worth of a billionaire dropped to \$3.6 billion, down \$300 million from last year. The #1 billionaire in the world is Bill Gates, with a net worth of \$75 billion dollars. And Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, is, at the tender age of 31, the sixth richest person in the world with a net worth of \$44.6 billion.

It's a fascinating list, but I suspect that these people may not necessarily be the happiest or even the most generous people in the world, proportionate to their income. You see, the wealthiest people in the world are those whose generosity keeps making our world become larger and larger, for they have learned the joy of giving. For those who give freely grow all the richer in spirit. And the one who blesses others is abundantly blessed.

On this Father's Day I remember and honor my father, who is the only one of our four parents still living. He was never a billionaire. In fact, he grew up of very modest means because his mother, my grandmother, was a single mother raising her son alone during the Depression. My dad doesn't ever remember a time he didn't work. He delivered newspapers, did odd jobs and helped a local farmer take his produce down to Philadelphia to sell at market.

My grandmother and my father barely scraped by, but they were so rich spiritually because of their Mennonite Church, which was also my church growing up. Because of a childhood sledding accident which injured an eye, my father could not enlist in the Navy as a fighter pilot during World War 2, which was his heart's desire. Rather, he served in the Merchant Marine. When my father returned home, the local high school principal, who saw something special in him, enabled my father to go to college, where he met my mother.

My father made his world large because of his generosity toward his family, church and his employees as a business owner. I learned from him that when you give to others, you receive far more in return. Our family was in church every single Sunday — my father in the choir, and my mother, grandmother and us four kids in the front row. My father gave up a lot to send his children to college and encouraged us to become all that God created us to be.

In January of this year, Gary and I were able to spend a few days with my father in Pennsylvania where he is in a church-affiliated assisted living facility. My dad still sings in the choir at the facility and attends church twice a week. In fact, we sang a duet together one night when Gary and I were there. But what brought tears to my eye was when Gary and I walked through the lobby of the relatively new apartment building where our guest room was located. I happened to glance at a big metal "giving" tree that listed the lead donors for the construction of the building. And there, unbeknownst to me, were the names of my mom and dad. Because my parents always gave freely, they grew all the richer. And because of their example, I inherited the riches of their legacy of generosity.

Friends, if you and I are going to make the world a better place, it has to begin with us. The unthinkable tragedy in Orlando has made it very clear that each one of us has to step up to the plate to teach and model tolerance, generosity of spirit and a deep desire to value and honor all people. Did you hear the questions we asked of the parents of the children who were baptized? Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

Now maybe that's not what you were taught. Maybe your parents exhibited prejudice, bigotry and judgment toward others when you were a child, but it's never too late to change. In fact, we have no choice but to change if our world is going to hold together and survive. "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away," says the wise man in verse 30.

If you and I haven't taught our children and grandchildren about unconditional love and acceptance of all, they will show us the way. The reality is that our children today are growing up in a world that reflects the diversity of God's creation everywhere we go. Our children go to school and church and play sports with children who have different first languages, ethnic backgrounds, religious practices and sexual identities. And you know what? They get it way more than you and I do.

As we continue to grieve the Orlando killings, we learn again that everything God created is... what? Good. Everything God created God called good. We're all good — every last one of us — because God made us. You, you, you and you. But it also means that when we refuse to love others for any reason, we act out of fear rather than generosity and reject the God who made them and us. It is only by seeking to understand, engage and embrace the other that we wise up and know the fullness of God's love.

No matter how different others seem to be, we are all God's children. And the only thing God asks of us is to give of ourselves freely and love one another. Will it be love or hate? Will it be hugs or violence? Will it be generosity of spirit or exclusion? It's time for all of us to open our hands to each other with hope and grace and say, "Here. Just take what you need."