

Poverty Trumps Wealth

Wayne Waibel – 09/25/2022

I really used to enjoy watching football. There was a time it was a game played by men who worked in the steel mills in the off-season. Or sold cars or insurance. The active word used to describe football was a game. For the most part the ranks were filled with gentlemen. Referees were afforded respect, and they in turn allowed these gentlemen to play the game. The average contest lasted no more than two hours.

The modern game has become a spectacle. Players spend more time watching themselves on the jumbotrons than actually playing. And the predominant vernacular contains the single most destructive phrase the game has ever seen, "upon further review." It takes longer to watch a typical game than it does to play a round of golf. I don't know for sure where the evolution of the game got derailed, but it is no longer the game of my youth.

I still enjoy watching the highlights, but I can no longer invest an entire afternoon in watching a spectacle that I alternately enjoy and despise depending on the action or outcome. Though I was never a student of the game really – I understood it, but now I think I'm missing the point.

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Missing the point must be a primary requisite for people in positions of power. Zedekiah didn't care for the narrative coming from Jeremiah regarding his certain defeat at the hands of the Babylonians, so he thought it prudent to imprison the prophet. Talk about blaming the messenger! This is what can happen when you speak truth to power. It is a risky business.

The rich man in today's parable upon seeing Lazarus in the arms of Abraham completely bypasses the poor man and speaks instead to Abraham, beseeching him to direct Lazarus to provide some relief for his torment. He still treats the beggar as though he is not even present – completely missing the point. And then has the audacity to request that Lazarus be dispatched to his father's house to warn his brothers of their folly.

A little bit further on in Luke, Jesus will be using the illustration of how it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to gain entry into heaven. It's as though with great wealth comes great blindness. The poor and marginalized are simply not in their view.

It should be noted that the rich man did not treat Lazarus with cruelty. He did not do him harm. He was not guilty of aggression toward the beggar. He simply did not see him. And that is the colossal failing of wealth. The basic inability to even see the poor and marginalized of the world.

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How often do we choose to look the other way when confronted with the homeless or other disenfranchised segments of our society? It's as though they don't exist as long as we don't make eye contact. I know it doesn't happen a great deal around here, but you can't take an exit off the highway into either Minneapolis or St. Paul without encountering someone with a sign.

Today's Gospel lesson presents us with the great moral challenge of seeing, and then making visible, the invisible suffering of the world. We see it all the time, and we also don't see it – all the time. The poor in our world are with us always. We don't need to look for them necessarily, but we do need to see them.

We've become hard-wired as a people to look past the unfortunates of our community. We tell ourselves that we do this out of sensitivity for their plight. We don't want to give them any kind of attention so as not to embarrass or humiliate them. The list of excuses is endless, but there really is no excuse. The humiliation lies within us. Stepping out of our privilege is perhaps one of the most difficult journeys of transformation.

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Paul's instructions to young Timothy resonate even today – "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness." The good news is that the blindness that so often accompanies wealth does not have to define who we are.

The basic necessities of life are food and shelter. It could be argued that anything beyond that constitutes wealth. For most of us in today's world – wealth is a given – the variable has more to do with the level of our wealth. Regardless of whether or not you feel wealthy – chances are you enjoy a good deal more than the basic necessities of life, so yes – you have wealth.

The reason it's not a problem for most of us is because we're very accustomed to sharing what we have – and that is the dividing line. I don't know why it is, but it seems those who have amassed a fortune have a real hard time parting with even a small amount, and that is when wealth becomes a form of idolatry.

It was very easy for Jesus to see that the Pharisees were guilty of that, which is why He was adamant about His mission to share the good news with the poor. This particular parable beautifully illustrates what Christ is driving home. The poor and disenfranchised of this world become the recipients of supreme wealth in the eternal world, and the rich of this world will find it difficult indeed to gain the same entry. That is why we should resolutely seek God, not in spite of, but in light of human suffering.

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We are always in a place of having to have faith. That's the beauty of a life of love in Christ Jesus. When you are able to get outside of yourself and focus instead on the welfare of others – your days are full, and your life holds value. Jesus does not put these parables together so He can hear Himself talk.

They tend to have a lot to do with the perils of wealth because He was usually talking to the Pharisees, and they were suffering from a serious lack of belief, because they held an awful lot of wealth. And that wealth, in no small way, was at the hands of the poor and invisible of first century Palestine. It's no different today.

And the powers that be are still amassing their wealth in the same manner. But the good news is the gap is starting to narrow. I'd like to think that's because the vast wealth out there is beginning to trickle down to the masses. Whether that's by intent or simply a happy accident may remain a mystery, but it would be nice if there were a reckoning afoot. A quiet realization at the highest levels that there resides in this world causes and catastrophes that demand a loss of self in order to achieve a redress.

Eternal life is not something we look forward to, it has arrived. Christ's coming into this world interrupted present time with the eternal. Since the kingdom of God is at hand, we are in a position to do much good. Because we are an Easter people, we care more about each other than ourselves. That makes us truly wealthy in matters of the Spirit. Amen.