

Proper 23, Year B

- As you're preparing for ordination, one of the things you have to do is take a series of exams called GOEs - general ordination exams
- Offered every January - cover series of topics in various disciplines - 6, to be exact
- And the intention is to test how your education and training have prepared you for ordination, how well you know the content of the faith and of our tradition
- In practice, it doesn't always work that way - sometimes questions end up a little bit too specific to test your general knowledge
- So, just by way of example, for my year, the question on theology was essentially to give two Christian theological perspectives on wealth
- Every year the question changes, so only the people being ordained the same year as me had to think about this exact question
- And really, I'm glad that I was forced to - I love to think through unexamined concepts in our faith
- Wealth - money - is just one of those things that we rarely give ourselves a chance to think theologically about
- Rarely take the time to really think through relationship between our faith and our money - not just saying this because annual pledge campaign season is coming up
- These are two topics that we tend to think shouldn't be brought up in polite company - religion and money
- As a result, we've too often roped them off as private matters, and so never thought about where they intersect
- If we had to be honest, part of our discomfort around it is the way that the Bible talks about money: 1 Tim - "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."
- Mt and Lk: "You cannot serve God and wealth."
- And then our Gospel today - it doesn't seem like our Scriptures have a terribly high view of money overall
- So it's important, I think, esp. When a passage like our Gospel reading today comes up, to examine these passages and examine our attitudes about money - ask things like, what do these passages mean? What messages about money have we internalized?
- The passage isn't an easy one - rich man comes to Jesus, kneels before him, and asks what he can do to inherit eternal life - Jesus ends up telling the rich man to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor - then, just in case that was ambiguous, goes

on to tell the disciples just how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God

- Most of the time, when people come to this passage, I've found they have one of two approaches:
 - First is to assume it applies equally to everyone - so some people will tell you that everyone has to sell everything they have and give the money to the poor
 - Second is to try to explain it away - and I've heard some pretty ingenious ones - some people have said the Greek word camel is actually an ancient typo, and what was meant was the similarly-spelled Gk word for "rope" or "cable" - or that "the eye of a needle" was a nickname for a narrow gate into the city of Jerusalem, and so camels couldn't pass through very easily and they had to take off all their baggage
- Neither of these, however, deals realistically with the passage before us - Jesus' commandment to the rich man is not inherently a command to everyone - Jesus might wish us to do likewise, but we can't simply assume that
- But we also can't try to explain it away, try to pretend Jesus didn't mean what he clearly did mean, in this situation
- Let me try to explain what I mean - there are other times when people come and kneel before Jesus - interestingly enough, usually seeking healing - these stories always reveal something - but we usually take them to reveal something about who Jesus is
- And then the rich man in this story comes and asks what he must **do** to inherit eternal life - it's a ridiculous question - you can't do anything to inherit - an inheritance is, by definition, something given to you by someone else - it's not something you can earn
- And Jesus mentions the commandments, and the man says he follows them already - and, we're told, Jesus looks at him **and loves him** (this is key! We're explicitly told that Jesus says it out of love!), when he tells him to sell everything and give the money to the poor
- So eventually, the answer this rich man, this man who thinks he can earn his way into heaven the same way he has (or at least thinks he has) earned up a vast sum of wealth on earth is given what sounds like a pretty harsh answer: give up everything - everything that you've earned, everything that you've worked hard for, everything that you're proud of
- Give up everything that you consider valuable - give it all away to others
- And, having heard this message, the rich man leaves, weeping
- There is one other way I've heard this story explained away, in a sense, and that's by saying that it's a call to all of us to be willing to give up what we care about - and maybe there's

an element of truth to that, but I think it's impossible to ignore that there is something different about money - something different about the way that money affects us, shapes us, makes us think about the world - not that wealth is evil, per se, but there is something spiritually dangerous about wealth

- Wealth is dangerous because it lies to us, and the lies it tells are ones we're all too willing to hear - tells us that we can make do on our own, that we ourselves have earned what we have, all of which we had no part in creating or making - wealth makes us think we can rely purely on ourselves, rather than on God
- Attitude evident even in the rich man's question: "what must I **do** to inherit eternal life?"
- Or even if we recognize wealth as a gift from God, its allure is such that we end up thinking it is the singular measure of blessing - we think wealth must be based on some favored status - that if these material things are a blessing, then those who have must be more blessed, more well-liked by God than those who have not - they must be better in God's eyes - we come away with a very narrowly defined conception of what 'blessing' means - we end up thinking that God shares our attachment to material possessions
- So a lifetime in pursuit of wealth has made this rich man view everything as a commodity - to boil everything down to a dollar value - and Jesus knows that the only way for the rich man to be free from this is to give it all away, to get rid of the temptation
- Jesus' rebuke to the rich man is out of love for **him** - why he doesn't tell him to give the money to Jesus, or to the apostles, or to the church - tells him to give it to the poor
- Tells him to rid himself of any delusions that he's earned what he has on this earth, or can earn what he hopes to have in the next
- Because all of it, Jesus knows, is a gift - an unearned gift of grace from God - (our wealth is no more earned than our breath)
- So I hope you find that helpful, in thinking about this passage - I hope I haven't simply explained it away - Jesus certainly means what he says to the rich man, says it lovingly, but means it every bit just the same
- And it's possible, if we see even a bit of ourselves in the rich man, that Jesus means this message for us, as well
- If that makes you uneasy, then you're in good company - it makes me uneasy, too
- Because like the rich man, I too readily think I've earned the gifts that God has given me
- Like the rich man, I too readily think I can work my way into God's good graces
- Like the rich man, I'm sure that if Jesus told me I had to give everything away, I would

weep too

- I just pray that my attachment doesn't run as deep as the rich man's did - I pray that I value God more than I value things - and even though it seems impossible for me to be less consumed with being a consumer, less concerned about myself and more concerned for the welfare of all of my fellow children of God, I give thanks that in God, all things are possible.