

“Rich Toward God”
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – July 31, 2022

Please Read:
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12: 13-21

Plato’s “The Apology of Socrates” recounts Socrates final defense at his trial at the turn of the 4th century B.C. He was accused of “introducing other gods and of corrupting the youth of Athens.” His argument was as follows: “Oh my friend, why do you who are a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? Are you not ashamed of this?... For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons and your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue come money and every other good of man, public as well as private. This is my teaching, and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, my influence is ruinous indeed...”¹

Socrates prepares us to appreciate Jesus’ teaching in this morning’s gospel text commonly known as the parable of the rich fool, and to have more sympathy with peoples’ irritation whenever scolded around the subject of money (Socrates was sentenced to death). Jesus boldly warns against greed. But the core issue of this text is the deeper issue, the soul issue about where we look to find our identity and security. Jesus said, “*one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.*” Many of us know this. But with a sigh ask, then in what *does* a person’s life consist?

Perhaps Jesus gives us a hint when he summarizes the capriciousness and unpredictability of life and death with the warning, “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” I don’t think Jesus was condemning the man’s success as much as he was critiquing his foolish ignorance of how quickly fortunes can change. The man was rich in stuff but poor in soul. And so I invite you to reflect with me today on what does it mean to be rich *toward God*?

In Colossians, Paul writes, “your life is hidden with Christ in God.” And then he says “*When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory...*” Two things are important about this statement. There is both a present and a future aspect of our lives. Paul is first of all saying that the core of our existence, our radical identity, is rooted in Christ. It is not our wealth, our intelligence, our accomplishments nor accumulations which ultimately define who we are. Our life is defined by our faith in Christ. As we give our allegiance to Christ and accept what he has done for us that we could not do for ourselves; as we commit to his way of self-giving love, we become a new creation. Paul talks elsewhere about our identity change from orphans to beloved children, heirs of God’s kingdom, from enemies and aliens to members of the household of God. As we are raised with Christ, the old categories of defining one another through ethnicity (Jew or Greek) or religiosity (circumcised or not) or nationality (Barbarian, Scythian) or social mobility (slave or free); are no longer important. For Paul, those categories are dead. “Christ is all and in all.”

¹ Charles W. Eliot, ed. *The Harvard Classics*, V. 2, 18.

Secondly, the full glory that we are in Christ is a *future* promise to be realized. It is something for which we must wait. We are declared to be the children of God, heirs of the Kingdom of God, and promised that Christ's full glory will be revealed in us. We are waiting for our adoption to be completed. This reality, though presently guaranteed, will only be fully realized and experienced in the future. It's just a matter of time. And so, we live between two worlds, the earthly and the heavenly, the now and not yet...

And so, in the meantime, while we wait for the consummation of Christ's glory to be fully realized in us, Paul exhorts us to "seek the things that are above," to "set our minds on things that are above..."

What does this mean? It means there are ways of thinking that will help us to live more into the life that is ours in Christ... In the fourth century A.D., just as Christians were being set free from state oppression, there was a man named Evagrius who was assistant to the bishop of Constantinople, the imperial capital. Evagrius was a brilliant scholar and held in high esteem by his colleagues. Unfortunately, during his time in Constantinople, he fell passionately in love with a married woman and, even though innocent of any wrongdoing, vowed to leave his post at the center of power to become a monk in Egypt. It was Evagrius who, as a desert monk, compiled what later became known as the "seven deadly sins." Rather than focusing on actions, Evagrius focused on the thoughts that led to the actions. Evagrius taught that greed is one of the major obstacles to following Christ. Greed is the opposite of generosity and is driven by the anxiety and insecurity caused by thinking that your physical security and welfare is solely up to you.

While I don't expect any of you to literally become a monk like Evagrius, I would encourage you to remember the origin of the word monk: *monacos* in the Greek. It means singular (mono) and implies a life of singular focus on and attention to God.

Practically speaking, pursuing our focus on God means letting go of or diminishing other pursuits. In the Colossians text Paul says this a little more bluntly. He says that we are to "put to death...whatever in you that is earthly." And then he lists a number of things which keep us from our life in Christ. There are two key words here which I find fascinating. The first is greed, which the apostle defines as "idolatry." Why does he equate greed with idolatry? Idolatry is the worship of a false god, of putting something in place of God's rightful throne in your heart. In other words, greed is the worship of a false God, wealth... It's false, because ultimately in life, wealth will not deliver fulfillment and meaning. You've seen the t-shirt: "He who has the most toys wins... but he who has the most toys still dies!"?

Secondly, I'm intrigued by another related word in this list of things you are to put to death. The NRSV and most Bibles translate the Greek word "epi-thumei" as "evil desire." But what that word in Greek really means is simply a "super-desire," an ultimate or "über-desire." This is interesting to me; in that I tend to think of evil desires as a desire that is bad in itself. I understand wanting to lie, cheat, steal, slander, and abuse others is bad. That is evil. But what Paul is saying here is that *any* desire, even a *good* desire, can become an evil desire *if* it becomes the driving force in our lives, if it becomes the functional god or ultimate purpose of our lives.

Consider the various desires in your life. Consider that even our best intentions can become an idol, an *epi-thumei*, if they take the place of or override our devotion to God. Even having a great marriage can be an “evil desire” if we put our devotion to our spouse *over* our devotion to God. Even having wonderful children can become an “evil desire” if we put our love and commitment to our children *over* our love and commitment to God. You see how this works? Greed is just an “über-desire for money and wealth.” Money isn’t bad in and of itself, but as the Apostle teaches elsewhere, “the love of money is the root of all evils.”²

Martin Luther astutely observed, “There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse.”³ And herein lies the paradox of money. Most of us are not called to give it all away. We are called to be good stewards, to invest and plan for the future. I’ve always tried to teach that God is not so much interested in your position in the financial world, but rather how you are positioning yourself toward others. Jesus put it this way, “To whom much has been given, much will be required.” It’s not how much money you have, but how much of you does money have?” John Wesley once practically advised, “Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.”

“The offering of money,” Mark Labberton writes in *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, “which is significantly the kind of offering we tend to think of most often and is itself a sign of power, presents us with a key moment in worship. Here is one of the great power collisions in worship. We live in a culture that worships money and neglects or forgets God. We are meant to live worshipping God and slaying the idols in our lives – including money. When the time for the offering comes each week, the practice helps us remember what belongs to us and what doesn’t.... It is not a cheap way of buying off our conscience or buying God’s love. It’s meant to be an act of surrendering our first fruits and facing down the power of money, status, achievement and self-absorption. In the offering we practice turning over power. That is a good thing.”

As the rich fool in the parable learned, all worldly power will be taken from us eventually. Things can change quickly in life. The fact is, most of us will never know when life in this world will end. And so, each day of life becomes a question of focus. In which god are you putting your trust and hope? What is your greatest desire, really?

As Socrates knew 25 centuries ago, this is a deadly serious matter. Archbishop Justin Welby opened the Lambeth Conference, the gathering of Anglican bishops from around the world this week. He closed his remarks with these words, “My prayer for this conference is very simple. It is that every here... may leave with a great desire for friendship with Jesus Christ. To desire Jesus is to desire God. To desire Jesus is to desire to be filled with love for God and love for God’s people.” I think that is precisely what it means to be rich toward God.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

² I Tim. 6:10.

³ Quoted in Richard Foster, *Money, Sex and Power*, 19.