

Willow Glen UMC October 9, 2011 “The Use of Money”
Matthew 19:16-26

Given the choice, most preachers would rather preach about what people should do in their bedrooms rather than what they should do with their bank accounts. We get into less trouble peeking into bedrooms! In my weekly email, I offered to send you a collection of quotations from Wesley’s sermons on money, warning you that he wrote some pretty strong stuff. And not a single one of you took me up on the offer. I think that speaks for itself. The truth is: we don’t want to hear what Wesley has to say about money, anymore than we want to hear what the Bible has to say. And that’s a good indication of what I need to preach about today.

The most challenging statements Jesus makes in the Bible he makes about money, and we’ve got a few of them in Matthew’s Gospel this morning: “Go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through

the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

We read those passages and like to think: “Whew, I’m off the hook. I’m not rich.” But John Wesley would beg to differ. In 18th-century England, as in the Bible, there were only two classes of people, the poor and the rich. The poor were those who didn’t have what they needed to live. The rich, according to Wesley’s definition, were those who had all the necessities of life (food, clothing and shelter) and something left over. And that makes almost all of us rich.

So, for Wesley, we are the rich young ruler. We should be giving away all things we have and don’t need. For, Wesley liked to say, God put a surplus in our hands for the single purpose of giving it to the poor. Otherwise, we are putting our souls in danger, storing up treasures on earth instead of treasures in heaven.

In a letter to his sister Patty, he wrote: “Money never stays with me. It would burn me if it did. I throw it out of my hands as soon as possible, lest it should find a way into my heart.” [Letters, October 6, 1768]

Though Wesley made a fortune publishing religious tracts, he didn’t keep any of it for himself. He got a salary from the Church of England to sustain him. The rest he gave away, for he said: “You will have no reward in heaven for what you lay up; you will for what you lay out. Every pound you put into the earthly bank is sunk: it brings no interest above. But every pound you give to the poor is put into the bank of heaven. And it will bring glorious interest; yea, and such as will be accumulating to all eternity.” [“The More Excellent Way” #89, 1787]

Just one problem: Wesley’s definition of wealth in the 18th century doesn’t convince us in the 21st century. Do you consider yourself rich? Probably not. Most of us are neither

poor nor rich, but somewhere in the middle, in a class that did not exist in Jesus' day or Wesley's day. And that makes it harder to understand what either of them have to say to us today.

I find that folks in the middle are often not rich in money, but rich in anxiety, and for good reason. Ever since the late 70's in this country, wages have not kept up with the cost of living. "Middle class" no longer means that you can afford to buy a house or pay for health care or send your kids to college. And that was true even before the recession hit and millions of us lost our jobs and homes. So, we may not be poor, but we feel like we're a paycheck away from poverty.

Blinded by worry, we are tempted to ignore Jesus and John Wesley because the last thing we want is to feel guilty. But I urge you to press on, because when you get beyond the guilt, you find the grace. I told you a few weeks ago that Wesley's theology was more of a both/and rather than an

either/or kind of thing. He was always standing in the middle of theological debates, trying to hold the truth from the two sides together. And in that same spirit, I want to suggest that the best way for the middle class to read the Bible is to read it as if we were both rich AND poor, because we are. On the one hand, we are rich enough to have much to give. And, on the other hand, we are poor enough to worry about how we are going to live. And that makes us confused enough to need some good guidance.

Wesley has a method, of course, for his Methodists, whether they be rich or poor. He tells us how we can use money and keep it from using us, even how the use of money can become a grace for us. In a sermon called, “The Use of Money,” he lays out his plan for Christian stewardship in three simple steps.

Step One: Hard honest work is a Christian virtue, so gain all you can. But this is Wesley not Wall Street, so there are

limits. He says: don't gain at the expense of anyone's life or health. That means don't let your work hurt you or your neighbor in mind, body or in soul. If you're a tobacco farmer, a subprime loan officer, a land mine manufacturer, maybe your greatest gain would come from a career change.

But even if our work doesn't directly hurt anyone, our lifestyle indirectly does. The way we consume things here in the first world, is not so good for our minds, our bodies or our souls. Wesley will haunt me the next time I'm driving down the freeway on a Spare the Air day. I guess Step One is not so simple after all.

But let's go on. Step Two: Save all you can. That sounds like Wesley is encouraging us to open a savings account, buy government bonds. But he's not. When he says "save all you can," he means don't spend money on stuff you don't need. Madison Avenue is not for Methodists! Don't waste your dollars to gratify the desires of the flesh or to gain the admiration of

others. The more you feed that desire for stuff, the more insatiable it becomes.

And don't waste your money on your children, either. Don't spoil them. Consider their souls and simply supply their minimum needs. Don't think you have to leave everything to them when you die. Wesley says: if they aren't going to use it in a way that pleases God, then give it to someone who will.

Now that's easy for Wesley to say. He didn't have any children. But, still, I'm amazed and saddened. I can't tell you how many funerals I've done for long-time church members, faithful Christians who have loved and served their church their entire lives. But when it comes to designating where the memorial gifts should go, their children never even consider the church. It ends up going to whatever disease they died of: the Alzheimer's Association, the American Cancer Society. Parents, listen up: don't count on your kids to remember your church. If you want your money to serve God, put it in writing!

Step Three: give all you can. Wesley reminds us that we are only stewards, not managers, of our money. So, provide what is needful for yourself and your family first. Then, if you have anything left over, you are rich. And if you want to get into heaven, give the rest away. That's how Wesley reads the Gospel lesson for today.

Now, as I said, the rich will hear that message and walk away. Like the rich young ruler, they don't want to hear what Jesus or Wesley has to say.

Meanwhile, the poor hear the word and realize that Jesus is talking to them, too. I remember my friend, Jack, a panhandler in Novato. Chatting with him outside Safeway the week of the tsunami in Indonesia, I told him that our church was raising money. He took out a \$5 bill and insisted that I give it to UMCOR. You see, he got it: even a panhandler knows that we must give in order to live, and no matter how poor you are, there's someone who needs that \$5 more than you.

I got a reminder of that every week by Vayola who would come to church and always ask us to pray for her to find a job. Vayola was from Haiti and she'd been out of work for months and months. Still, she tithed. Whatever came to her that week, a tenth of it went to God. When our usher, with good intentions, tried to discourage her from putting her envelope in the plate, she slipped the money to me. And I was thinking: For mortals, this is impossible. But for God, all things are possible.

With nothing to lose and heaven to gain, the poor are getting the message. But how do those somewhere in the middle hear the same message? If we hear it at all, we will hear it as if we were poor *and* rich: like the poor, knowing what we need to do, and like the rich, lacking the will and needing the grace to do it.

For God, all things are possible. And, yes, the grace of God can come to us in the middle. I trust you to give all you can because ever since I got here, I've been marveling at how

gifted you are. Rich or poor, you already seem to know that you have to give in order to live. And I know that some of you can teach the rest of us how to trust in God as if we had nothing and give to others as if we had everything.

May the grace of God come to Willow Glen in the weeks ahead. May we get the message that Jesus is sending to us in the middle. And if we can't hear it in a sermon, maybe we can hear it in a song:

Take my wealth; it is not mine.
I just keep it for a time
til I'm called to send it on
so that your good will be done.
Take the riches you gave me
so that Christ's poor can be free.
Save me from my anxious fear.
Everything I need is here.

And everything we need can be asked for in prayer. Grace Praisewater is now going to tell us how we can support the church through our prayers.