

Instructions to the 'Rich'
 I Timothy 6:6-19
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The front page of the Wisconsin Journal on Tuesday this week drew attention with the caption, "Who knew? Recession is Over." This "fact" based on the National Bureau of Economic Research surprised 'rich' and 'poor' alike. Warren Buffet, the second wealthiest American, and the world's third wealthiest person said, he was surprised; and I suspect that most of the nearly 15 million unemployed and 10 million underemployed Americans were also "surprised." Who knew, two years ago, that financial news would dominate our media and more importantly much of our lives through 2010 and beyond? Who knew, the rampant ripple effects that a recession would have in our ever shrinking and interdependent world: where definitions and experience of 'rich' and 'poor' are constantly changing.

Who knew then how a recession would affect our personal, communal, ecclesiastical (church) and global lives? Who knows now, how many other effects it will have. One area that surprised some and pleased many around the world was the results of the United Nations Summit that met this week on the Millennium Development Goals. Even in spite of the recent recession and its worldwide affects, the United Nations Summit on Millennium Development Goals, concluded their meeting with the adoption of a global action plan to achieve the eight anti-poverty goals by their 2015 target date and they announced major new commitments for women's and children's health and other initiatives against poverty, hunger and disease. This courageous global commitment takes place in a billion different local contexts. Not just the more than one billion people in the world who live on less than one dollar a day and not just the additional 1.7 billion people who struggle to survive on less than two dollars per day...these are some of the people the world community seeks to help through these important goals, but other contexts include people like us, who each in our own ways are facing financial challenges, personal, communal and ecclesiastical.

The Bible has a wealth of verses on the controversial topics of money and possessions. There are roughly 2,350 Bible verses about money and possessions, and 15% of all that Jesus said was on these topics. Certainly, the struggles with money and wealth, rich and poor are not new. Although vast amounts were said, Biblical interpretation has tended to emphasize the poor. Of course, this is a crucial message in the past and in the present, but today's text addresses the rich. In looking at this text, our lectionary text [the assigned text] for today, I recognize the risk that no one may be happy with this sermon! But there is a message for us; before we get to that message let me share with you a story about a man named Joe.

I've told you before how my serving a church in the Hamptons on the East End of Long Island, New York has influenced my understanding of texts like these. As you may or may not know, The Hamptons is one of the wealthiest areas in the United States. While I served there, we had an economically diverse worshipping community made up of millionaires, and those with moderate incomes. However, Joe's story in particular has stayed with me over the last twenty plus years. Joe grew up in a family whose income was below the poverty level. Through his hard work as a contractor and some would say "a stubborn determination," Joe became a multimillionaire. Joe's family were all involved in the church. When asked about his involvement, Joe would say, "I don't get involved with the church, there's no place for me there...God doesn't like my money and the church just wants it."

Although the story of the rich young ruler's encounter with Jesus immediately comes to mind to prove Joe right, this perception, "there's no place for the rich in the church," is far from the whole Biblical witness. We know of stories that say otherwise. For example, Jesus going to the home of Zacchaeus, the rich tax collector. Did Jesus just go there to get Zach to give half his money to the poor or did Jesus meet Zach exactly where he was, a rich man, and then Jesus told him of God's tremendous love for him, and upon hearing that and receiving that love, Zach responded with generosity? Or what about the three women who traveled with Jesus? These women had no connections with a man, no husband, no father, no brother. In those days, in order to have that kind of independent status, we are told they would have had to be independently wealthy women. It is believed by some scholars that these wealthy women actually financially supported Jesus' ministry. Jesus' ministry had room for the rich as well as a passion for the poor. Our Scripture lesson today, addresses the rich in a way that some may say: who knew?

Who knew then, in the 1st century, that the text from I Timothy 6 would be most known in centuries to come from its 10th verse being incorrectly quoted as: "money is the root of all evil..." What it actually says is "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." This is consistent with the greatest commandments summarized by Jesus, love God first, and others as yourselves and also with the first commandment, we are not to have any other "god" before God. This was the block for the rich young ruler but not for Zach or the women. For some, then and now, money is god and the author of I Timothy is saying that loving money more than loving God can cause some to wander from their faith. We know this to be true! So the author then gives guidance to the rich to avoid such a consequence, to keep the rich in the faith. There is room for the "rich" in the church and not just for money but for the living out of the gospel...for God so loved the world...all the world poor and rich.

Starting at verse 17, the author gives instructions to the rich of how to live in faith and in faithful community. Verse 17: As for those who in the present age are rich...that age and our age, this is the message. But I know some of you may want to first argue the point, who are the rich? By the world's standards we are rich. We may disagree. We may not feel like we are rich. Some in our midst may be struggling from pay check to pay check and some may not have a pay check at all! Some believe rich is a matter of perspective: what is rich for one, may not be rich for another. And for some, being rich by the world's standards of wealth would still not be enough. I will let you decide for yourselves whether or not you are rich, but in any case, listen to these instructions. They may not be inspirational but they are informative. Instructions for the rich from I Timothy 6: There are five.

1. Do not be haughty. If we are rich, we are to be humble. In humility, we are to recognize and remember all we have comes from God. We are to give thanks to God, this gratitude enables us to be and to remain humble.

2nd Instruction: Do not set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches. From the recent recession we have been reminded for ourselves the wisdom of these words. We know all too well, that financial markets will fluctuate. Money will fail us...we cannot set our hopes and dreams on it. In so many ways it is hard not to...but listen now to this surprising word...perhaps you might even say; who knew?

Instruction 3. Enjoy life! God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. God wants us to enjoy life. Do we believe that or do we hold back our happiness? What makes us happy? What makes you happy? Is it money? Or is it the things money buys? Or is it the things we hope that money will buy us...the intangibles of security, contentment, love? In the boom of the 90's and

early 2000's, and the dominance of the consumer age, things were obtained, but did they give us what we most wanted or needed...did they give us the things that bring joy into our lives? Do we keep our enjoyment of life separated from our life of faith...and do we keep our faith separated from our enjoyment of life? God wants to share our enjoyment with us...who knew? The author continues...and gets to a point we are much more familiar and comfortable.

Instruction 4: The rich in the present age are to do good, to be rich in good works. Now this we know! Doing good helps others and helps us feel good about ourselves. Opportunities to do good, through service, whether in schools, in societies, in our churches, and through the sharing of our money, opportunities are prevalent...so much so we have to be discerning on where we commit to do our good! In all cases, we are committed to helping others, serving all. We all know that the recent recession has impacted many non-profits and churches, causing them to struggle financially. But we continue to meet the challenges and to share in good works; locally and globally...this leads us to the fifth instruction to the rich.

Instruction 5. We are to be generous and ready to share. This will keep us humble. This will help us fulfill not only our hopes and dreams but the hopes and dreams of others as well. This will help us enjoy life and to help others enjoy life. So not only are we to do good, but we are instructed how we are to do good...with what attitudes we are to have. The attitudes we are to have are to be generous and willing, ready to share! Our attitude towards the good we do makes a difference in our enjoyment of it. Like Zacchaeus who encountered Christ in a way that changed his life, he joyfully, gratefully, generously and willingly gave half to his riches to the poor.

And as if the author knew to anticipate the question: why should we do all these things. He says, if the rich follow these instructions, they store up for themselves treasures for a good foundation for the future. What foundation are we laying for our future individually and communally? What heavenly treasures will come on earth from our following these instructions? Powerful questions ~ endless possibilities! And finally, the author of I Timothy says, the rich are to do all of this so that they may take hold of life that really is life. What is the life that really is life...an authentic life, a life of service, a life of love, a life with God? Jesus said, "I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly." A life that really is life is a life that allows God to meet us where we are: poor or rich, and then with the confidence of being met and loved, we go to make a difference in the world.