

## **“Priceless”**

**Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 Mark 10:17-31**

**Scott B. Martin – October 11, 2009**

A one week vacation at the Atlantis Hotel, with day spa, para-sailing and your choice of salt or fresh water pools \$4,475. A rolex watch with diamonds \$8,640. A 2010 Cadillac with leather upholstery, gps, and surround sound audio/visual system \$48,300. Entering the Kingdom of God, priceless!

This passage about the “Rich Young Ruler” is one of the most poignant, one of the most difficult and one of the most haunting passages in all of the Gospels. It is poignant because it deals with the ultimate spiritual quest, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” There may be other ways to word this but what it comes down to is “How can we, how can you, how can I, live a truly fulfilling spiritual life?” It is difficult because we have to live that spiritual life here and now, in this very material world, with all of its very real material needs. It is haunting because unless we become monks or nuns and take a vow of poverty, or unless we give away all that we own and never again have to deal with material wealth we are going to have to keep negotiating this question.

One of my most memorable professors at Eden Seminary was Dr. Walt Brueggemann. He once addressed the question of religion in a most surprising way for a Christian professor of Old Testament. I do not have the exact quote; but the gist of it has stuck with me ever since I first heard it, because it strikes me as being profoundly true. Here is a close paraphrase of it: there swirls around all of our lives deep and abiding transcendent mystery

but I've got to live my life and my life revolves around sex and money and so I find that "religion is exhausting."

Now here are some questions for us all, "Why would he say that?" "Why might religion be exhausting?" "Isn't religion supposed to bring us peace of mind and heart?" What do you think about this?

(Give the congregation a chance to share.)

Now let's relate this to our gospel passage. Do you think we see this at work in our gospel passage? (give the congregation time to answer – if answers are slow in coming help them consider the following points:

- When Jesus comes near the Rich Young Ruler comes RUNNING up to Jesus to ask him "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Clearly he feels he is missing something important in his life.
- Yet when Jesus asks if he has kept the 10 Commandments the man says he has done so since he was a young man. To some this may sound like idle boasting, but remember when the man said this Jesus looks "lovingly" at him. Clearly the man is a good, practicing man of God and yet he feels something important is missing in his life. Interestingly, when Jesus is listing some of the 10 Commandments he includes one that isn't actually one of the original 10 Commandments "Thou shall not defraud." This lets us know the man did not gain his wealth by ill-gotten means. He either inherited it or earned it honestly.
- When Jesus says he lacks one thing "he must sell all he has and give it away to the poor" the man is "shocked" and goes away "grieving." Why is this? Refusing to go along with Jesus' idea is easy enough to understand, but why did he go away "grieving."

It is impossible to read or hear this story about the Rich Young Ruler and not put ourselves in the Rich Young Ruler's shoes. After all, no matter how generous and self-less we may have been in our lives up till now, none of us, including me have followed Jesus' advice to the Rich Young Ruler, "sell all and give it away to the poor and follow me."

Whether we use the word grief to describe our reaction to this truth or use Dr. Brueggemann's idea that "religion is exhausting" the plain truth is that in important ways we are in the same position as the Rich Young Ruler. The plain truth is that it doesn't have to be that way. Some people actually do exactly what Jesus suggests. The 12 Disciples did exactly this. They left their homes, their jobs, their families and followed Jesus. Through the centuries countless others have done it as well, some well known like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Benedict, or to choose more contemporary examples Millard Fuller or Mother Teresa. Beyond the well known names tens of thousands of unknown people have become monks, nuns and ascetics across the whole spectrum of religions.

In doing so many of these people have not only been a blessing but they have found their lives to be blessed. Jesus certainly promised the disciples a blessing. For doing this Jesus tells them they will indeed be blessed, that they will receive **"a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life."** (Mt. 10:30)

Setting aside for a moment Jesus foretelling that they will experience persecution. Let us consider for a moment the rest of Jesus' promises. Having given away all they had and leaving their families, why does Jesus promise they will have houses, land and relatives by the score? What Jesus seems to be saying is that having left their own families and

material possessions behind they will enter a new community. In that community they will find new sustaining relationships both with the poor they help and with other kindred spirits. As far as material things go perhaps Jesus is suggesting this community will share all things in common such as they did in the early days of the church and as continues to happen in various monastic communities or communities like Koinonia Farms in Georgia.

I wonder if something of this spirit can not be found in the way we are all inspired by the selfless acts of people like Mother Teresa or Millard Fuller, who gave up their personal wealth or the pursuit of wealth to serve the poor. We are so impressed that today Mother Teresa's order the Sisters of Charity has spread around the world carrying on Mother Teresa's vision of helping the poor. These programs are supported by donations large and small by tens of thousands of people. Likewise Habitat for Humanity has grown into a worldwide organization providing low income housing for the poor. This organization is supported by millions of people from ex-presidents to ordinary people like you and I.

Perhaps you have experienced what I have experienced, of all the things I've spent money, time and effort on: just keeping body and soul together; keeping a roof over my head and cloths on my back, providing for my retirement, cars, entertainment, vacations, the things that have been truly "priceless" have bee donations I've made, my giving to the church, and time spent on mission work camps, when for at least a week or two, in a way, I live like I have given all my possessions away.

Most of the world's religions try to help people with the struggle of negotiating living in this material world and yet hungering for the transcendent that is all around us. In Hinduism there are four stages to

life. One begins life as a student, studying the religious texts, learning from one's parents and family, and studying to make a living. After this comes the householder stage when one marries, sets up house and generally is to become a contributing member of society, a good citizen. Not all Hindus move on to the next stage, but the men are encouraged to become "forest dwellers" late in life. Those who do provide for their wives and children, leave their jobs and "retire" to the forest or wander the streets as "holy men." They spend increased time studying the holy texts, praying and meditating. The final stage is occurs either at the very end of life when one reaches nirvana and becomes one with the divine.

All the religions call for caring for the poor through financial contributions and hands on action. This is done not just for the sake of the poor, as important as this is; but also for the sake of the donors. In giving and through helping one helps to keep material things in perspective and use these material things in ways that help us to break the chains that tend to bind us to the purely material. Donations to churches, synagogues, temples and mosques can have the same affect. Donations to any charitable purpose can have this affect.

John Shea tells of an experience he had as a noted public speaker. It happened when he was a young man, just starting out on the speaking circuit. He was in Oklahoma City and had just finished his talk and was visiting with people afterwards. People would come up and ask him questions about what he had said or point out things he SHOULD have said or NOT said.

An old Native American man, probably a Cherokee, given the location, came up to Shea and stood in front of him. He had a very large

and elaborate belt buckle in his hands. It was beautifully hand made and was a swirl of colored beads. "Please accept this gift" he said.

Nothing like this had ever happened to Shea before. He was taken aback. He quickly said what all of us would say, "Thank you. It's beautiful; but I can't accept it."

The Old Indian looked puzzled and said, "Why not?"

Shea searched for something to say Shea laughed and pointed to his rather large abdomen and said, "Well, would you want to call attention to THIS stomach with a large, beautiful buckle?"

The Old Indian did not smile. He simply extended the buckle again and said "Please accept this."

Shea continued to do his best not to accept the buckle. Growing more desperate he came closer to the truth, saying, "It's too expensive." Like most of us he had been taught not to accept gifts, particularly expensive gifts from people.

The Old Indian continued to look straight at Shea. "You know" he said, "you CAN give it to someone else."

Shea accepted the buckle and learned valuable lesson that day.

When Jesus told the Rich Young Ruler that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven he would have to sell all he had and give to the poor, the man was shocked and went away sorrowfully. Jesus then turned to his disciples and said, "**Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God.**" (Mt. 10:25) The Disciples themselves become a bit worried at this stage and say, "**Then who can be saved?**" (Mt10:26)

As Charles Cousar points out, "Being a disciple never allows one to negotiate a permanent peace with the world, where of course wealth is a highly cherished and honored value. There always remains a critical tension

with the world, which often results in hostility and violent opposition. Since the church cannot flee the arena in which it is called to serve, it needs the constant reminder that the first will be last and the last first.” May God sustain us in the midst of this tension. Amen.