



**Oh Lord: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.**

This past week I got a mailer from the organization Fair Share for Massachusetts. I suspect many of you did, too. Fair Share for Massachusetts is the primary sponsor of Question 1, a ballot initiative that would create a 4 percent surcharge on those Massachusetts households which earn more than 1 million dollars a year, the proceeds from which would generate billions for needed infrastructure and education improvements. In case you have forgotten, all of us in this space, at least in theory, have our incomes taxed at 5%. This initiative would tax every dollar over a million at 9%. This has stirred some controversy. And I'm not here to take sides. It turns out that this ballot initiative, according to a Tufts University analysis, would affect only about 26,200 taxpayers, or less than 1 % of tax paying households in the Commonwealth.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/09/22/business/there-are-rich-people-then-there-are-one-time-millionaires/?p1=StaffPage>, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/massachusetts-ballot-measure-would-raise-billions-for-education-infrastructure>

I thought to myself, whew, that's not going to affect us in the Rectory! Thus, initially, in the light of today's Gospel reading, when I put myself in the scene, I thought to myself, I am surely not the rich man. So, I got to thinking. I went to a website called "how rich am I?"

It turns out that a priest and a teacher living in Needham, are richer than 99% of the world's population of 7.8 billion people. Our adjusted gross income is 24.8 times the world median.

<https://howrichami.givingwhatwecan.org/how-rich-am-i>

In the United States, where income disparity is just about the worst of the developed nations, we fall into the middle of the top 20%. But at the top of that 20%, the average household income is nearly 10 times greater than ours. The top 1% on average makes 37 times more than the bottom 20% of US households. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-inequality-debate#chapter-title-0-2>

The chasm between rich and poor that Abraham identifies in the parable this morning is a reality in our world and getting worse. But I'm here to scold us. Yet, in case we haven't noticed, Scripture last week and this week directs our attention to our relationship with wealth and material possessions. More than most Christians in history, we have to struggle with the ways that money and material possessions are dangerous.

At first glance, the danger is greater than just spending too much on ourselves, and not enough to lift up the poor, as critical as that is. The plain sense of the text, consistent with the first century social and theological setting of this passage— we run the risk of an unpleasant afterlife if we neglect the poor.

Even accounting for Jesus' heavy use of hyperbole throughout the Gospels, we sit up and take notice. For the sake of our eternal souls, as well as the for the sake of the poor, we are exhorted to be so very aware of the ways that we ignore poverty or see through, or beyond, those in need.

How many of us have felt relief as the traffic light changes so we can ignore the poor person who comes toward our window with a cardboard sign on our way out into the suburbs? How many of us have averted



our eyes from the homeless person who looks to us for aid? The danger is that wealth isolates us in real, earthy, ways from other human beings and even from ourselves.

We are invited to ask ourselves, how do our possessions and attitudes toward money separate us from our fellow humans, and what are ways do they draw us closer? To what extent are our possessions primarily a source of status satisfaction, and to what extent are they a means by which to serve our neighbors and enjoy God's creation? To what extent does our wealth mask the vulnerability that we share with all humanity, and even with the natural world, and to what extent can it bring healing to the natural world and humanity?

For in the end, as we look at the Gospel story in Luke, it is what the rich man's wealth does to his humanity that sends him to Hades. He allows his wealth to separate him from his fellow human beings. It is not his wealth *per se*. As John Wesley, 18<sup>th</sup> century Anglican priest and founder of Methodism, says in one of his sermons, "It is no more sinful to be wealthy than poor. But it is dangerous beyond all expression." (Sermon 112)

Not once does the rich man see Lazarus as a human being. In the parable, Lazarus is totally ignored by the rich man while he is alive. Only after death does the rich man acknowledge Lazarus' existence. But even then, it is only as a tool for meeting his own desires. *And even then*, the rich man does not address Lazarus directly. He says to Abraham, "Tell Lazarus to get me a drink! Tell Lazarus to go warn my brothers!" The rich man's wealth blinds him to the needs and cries of humanity, and of his own soul.

Having said all that... this warning should point us to a deeper truth, and motivate us out of love and gratitude, rather than fear of judgement. The larger reality is that our God is faithful and just, slower to anger and of great kindness. Out of this positive vision, we are all empowered to resist greed, promoting instead generosity, faith, kindness, love, endurance and gentleness—as the Letter to Timothy tells us this morning. We *do* acknowledge the stranger at the gate in our work with MANNA, with Haiti, through Community Concerns, through our use of solar power that is gentle on the earth and on humanity, and other good works that we do in other parts of our lives.

We *can* meet the eye of a homeless person, we *can* respond to a stranger who seeks our help.

Or to put it another way: as a faith community we do not ultimately believe in great chasms that have been fixed in the heavens. We believe quite the opposite, in fact: we believe that there exists a deeper unity and a common purpose that brings out the best in us when we actively participate in it and consciously reach out to others. The Gospel of Luke is very clear that Jesus' primary focus was to "bring good news to the poor and set the captive free."

May we continue to be challenged, and also changed, as we do the same.

**Amen.**