

## The Riddle of Riches and Grace

Hear this, all you peoples;  
hearken, all you who dwell in the world, \*  
you of high degree and low, rich and poor together.

<sup>2</sup>  
My mouth shall speak of wisdom, \*  
and my heart shall meditate on understanding.

<sup>3</sup>  
I will incline my ear to a proverb \*  
and set forth my riddle upon the harp.

All the readings we have heard this summer have danced around one of the great riddles of our faith: the enchanting and uneasy relationship between flesh and spirit. Both Jesus and Paul tell us to turn away from earthly things and to embrace heavenly things, but what in the world does this look like in practice? Is it pie in the sky stuff? Is it permission to trash the earth and help ourselves to what we want because ultimately the material world doesn't matter? Does the relationship require strict celibacy of the clergy and boundaries around love? Are we called to renounce our earthly delights and earthly goods? Is heavenly aspiration, as Paul suggests in the letter to the Colossians, a rather scolding laundry list of things to get rid of, because we are supposed to be dead to them and God is very, very angry at our disobedience? Is heaven a matter of obedience? Today's readings, if taken together and read as a meditation, reveal very clearly the difficulty of knowing what all this means, because, if all three address the question, all three frame it in different ways. So, what does it mean to speak of earthly things? What does it mean to turn our minds toward heaven?

Let's begin with the Gospel, because it seems to be the most straightforward: what good, Jesus asks, does it do the rich landowner to build new barns if his life is going to be demanded of him that very night? The first time I worked that text was at a retreat hosted in 1993 by the Ministry of Money. Our Bible study concluded with that most obvious of observations: *you can't take it with you*. We all know that. But is that all to know? In one of the most poignant moments of my life, I sat at the death bed of my very wealthy aunt, whom I loved like a second mother. As the poor relation, the one who, from childhood, had been expected to die to earthly things and live for higher values, I thought fondly of my aunt's life and was also pleased to be over my envy of it: she really did have it all: beauty, grace, a fabulous range of estates and experiences. She was la padrona of a spreading ranch in Butte County and mistress of two wooded acres in Marin. She traveled the world, wrote a book, had many, many friends, and fourth row season seats at the opera. I remember saying to her two days before she died, "You did it. You had a wonderful, noble life, la padrona," and before I could say another word, she became agitated (she was in a semi coma at the time) and shaking her head vehemently, breathed out the word "No." It was like being touched by the Christ. It knocked my consciousness clear across the room.

Deathbeds change things. Jesus not only knew that, he staked his very life upon it. *This very night your life is being demanded of you.* The end matters, and the end makes us equal. Or as the Roman poet Horace said, *Pallida mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas regumque turres*, "Pale death calls with equal ring/ at the pauper's huts and the tower of the king." If you have ever kept watch as someone you love has died, you may have experienced the astounding spirituality of it, that amazing oneness as the cares and fusses of daily life stand still in the face of profundity. When people die, all the worry lines melt out of their faces. It's a physical fact. Death confers peace. All that earthly stress goes to someone else.

Which gets me back to the riddle. This teaching of Jesus' is only secondarily about what one can and cannot take with one; it's much more about the negative emotions that surround the transfer. "Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Rather like two weeks ago, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." Death may be the great leveler, but life is the great unfair. Why do some get the inheritance while others are stuck doing all the cooking?

I mean, it is well and good to exhort people to "get rid of all such things-- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth," and tell them, well, you've got this new life, now go out and behave yourself, but everyone knows that willing something to be the case does not make it so. There is even a very curious phenomenon taking place right in our own society. Statistical studies are showing that even as we become more anxious as a nation, with one in four Americans reporting emotional illness over the past year, our self-esteem scores are rising at a precipitous rate.<sup>1</sup> This is borne out in an upcoming movie Waiting for Superman, in which, in a list of 30 developed countries, American children scored 25<sup>th</sup> in math, 21<sup>st</sup> in science, but a whopping number 1 in confidence.

Does this count as an earthly or heavenly concern? Is self esteem something that St. Paul would hector us over, or would he tell us that confidence leads to hope? Although he calls passion, desire and greed earthly things, they are in fact very spiritual. That's why I'd like to propose a slightly different way of looking at all this. Our emotions, our souls and spirits which guide so many of our bodily actions can manifest as either constructive or destructive. Constructive feelings like compassion, support and love struggle within each one of us against such negative feelings as insecurity, rivalry and envy. That great medieval list of deadly sins: pride, envy, wrath, greed, gluttony, sloth, and lust, are really nothing more than destructive manifestations of love. We love stuff and status and momentary gratification more than God. So easy to do. The stuff is so much more accessible. You see, the material world is what awakens the life within us. At every turn, the world excites our emotions: love, hate, excitement, beauty,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2009, p. 36-37, 65

desire, fear, greed, and every single one of these, if blessed, can bring us face to face with God, and if not blessed, can lead us right into the valley of the shadow of death.

Money, for example, and I use this example because that's what they're arguing over in the Gospel, money has no independent existence whatsoever. It has power over us because we have agreed that money is the medium through which we give things value. As the arbiter of value, money is exciting. It conveys power, status and breathless possibility. According to many, it is money that determines whether we rise or fall, flourish or flounder, even live or die. When something is this powerful, it is very easy to lose ourselves in its allure. Allure is the operative word. Remember, money itself has no value save as we give it value. Especially in this electronic age, it is only a transaction. The fruit in the Garden of Eden was also a transaction. It gave us both knowledge and the ability to misuse it. It is both the answer and the question.

"Take care!" says Jesus. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." But it is not the possessions he warns us against. It is the greed that tempts us to put those possessions and the status they convey in the place of God. And when I say this, I want to emphasize that even greed is just misplaced love.

Economy is one of the most important words in Christian theology. Not economy in the sense we talk about it in this country, as money and profit, but economy as exchange and relationship. In the economy of God, we are all precious, and the Trinity, which is the place where that word is most often used, is an economy of radical equality. The "economy of the Trinity" is the best phrase to describe a God whose nature is in relationship, and whose transaction is love.

The Buddhists talk about all of this a little differently, and it is for this very reason that I find their teachings helpful. It is easy to gloss over familiar phrases in the Bible: "all is vanity and a chasing after wind," or Paul's constant exhortations that seem to say if only we tried harder we'd be better. The Buddhists teach that the root of all suffering is attachment. The moment I get into a spirituality of wanting stuff: whether that stuff is experiences, relationships, houses, youth, etc., I am bound to suffer, and whether or not I get that stuff, others will suffer too, because I am putting my own emotions ahead of them. That's the whole thing about the rich farmer and his McMansion barns. He's full of himself at the very moment God is calling him to let go.

Four years ago, at an international conference, the man who has let go of so much, HH Dalai Lama, said, "Compassion is not a luxury, it is a necessity for human beings to survive." At this year's session, which was dedicated to "Compassion in Economics," William George of Harvard Business School spoke of compassionate, authentic leadership. In his view it is essential for a healthy society. He sees the global financial mess not as an economic failure, but a

spiritual failure; people's desire for more and more satisfaction derived from materialism led down a path of greed and destruction. There is a loss of confidence in our leaders today, but failures in leadership ultimately come from leaders who place their self-interest ahead of others, inevitably causing great damage.

Bill asked the Dalai Lama, "How do you think we can develop more leaders?" His Holiness replied, "I believe it comes from the training of inner values. Which many of you out there may already know, but you may not be fully convinced. I think mainly education will help development. With proper thought, we can make education and other fields develop more compassionate people."<sup>2</sup>

Among other things, compassion is loving those who will come after. To teach, which is what the Dalai Lama is encouraging us to do, is to give oneself away. It is the precise opposite of all the complaints in today's readings. Ecclesiastes: "I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me -- and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?" Luke: "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

I probably should have used today as an opportunity to talk about stewardship; that's certainly what many in the Church suggested. But I'm a storyteller and a teacher, and what I would like to leave with you is that we're all part of a story that did not begin with us and will not end with us. Each life is a chapter. To be rich toward God is to write such a wonderful chapter that others will receive it with joy. Not to hold on, but to let go. God knows what we need. AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mindandlife.org/blog/compassion-in-economics/>