

Sermon for Pentecost VIII Year C 2025
All that glitters . . .

Have you ever wondered why we are all so fascinated by wealth and the lives of the wealthy?

Just think of the number of popular TV shows in the past until now all centering on the lives of the rich—

Back in the day there was *Dynasty* and *Dallas*—
more recently it was the series *Succession*
and currently it's *The Gilded Age*.

While I could never bring myself to watch *Succession* past the first episode, I confess I am very hooked on *The Gilded Age*.

Any other fans out there?

Perhaps it's a combination of envy—we long for the money and fine things and the influence—and *schadenfreude*, the satisfaction of seeing the high and mighty suffer and squirm.

Perhaps we may even think that if we had such wealth, we would not be so greedy and scheming and unkind.

And here comes Jesus just in time to disabuse of us of all of that!

Part of me groaned just a bit when I realized the gospel this week would mean a sermon on money.

Even though I've given lots of sermons on money . . . frankly, I sometimes just don't want to preach on it.

Money is one of the topics we're not supposed to bring up in polite company—

(Say! Maybe that's another reason we let shows like *The Gilded Age* and *Succession* do it for us!—but I digress.)

Most of us get squirmy when people ask about.

Especially when we are asked in ways that challenge our lifestyles or our priorities.

For all sorts of reasons, many would prefer talking about Christian virtues that are safely abstract—faith, hope, love, joy.

But budgets? Retirement plans? Shopping habits?

Tithes and offerings?

Those are so specific and so concrete. So private.

But you know what?

Jesus doesn't care one bit about our sensibilities about money.

So here we go . . .

A man approaches Jesus and asks him to arbitrate a dispute he's having with his brother . . .

Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.

This is all the context we get . . .

but, the request sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

After all, the guy isn't asking to inherit more than his brother, he just wants Jesus to advocate for basic fairness.

But here's how Jesus responds:

Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Wait, now.

Since when is desiring fairness the same thing as being greedy?

If that's not confusing enough, Jesus keeps going.

He tells a parable about a rich landowner who carefully stores his wealth ahead of his retirement—only to learn that his life is about to end:

You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.

And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?

Hmmm . . . that's kind of puzzling, isn't it?

What's wrong with planning ahead? With saving for a rainy day?

With making prudent choices when it comes to wealth management?

But wait, there's more. Jesus concludes his parable with one more warning: *So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.*

What does that mean?

What does it mean to be "rich toward God?"

These are all hard and uncomfortable questions.

Perhaps the best we can do is wrestle with them.
Yet, for me, I think one of the important takeaways from this parable is that Jesus definitely doesn't think about money the way I sometimes do. He isn't as concerned about fairness and equity as I think I am. He doesn't see the world (and our time, talent and treasure) as being conveniently compartmentalized into "secular" and "sacred" realms. Jesus sees all of this differently. Where we see in part, Jesus sees the whole. Where we see what's pressing along the surfaces of our lives, Jesus sees the depths of our hearts. Where we obsess over the temporal, Jesus fights hard for the eternal.

Jesus looks at the man embroiled in a family feud over money and possessions and sees that his obsessive need for a fair share is twisting, gnarling, and embittering his heart. In the heat of his pursuit, he's not able to discern that his inner life is in trouble. He can't see his own brother as anything more than an obstacle or a competitor. He's so concerned about possible scarcity that he doesn't even notice actual abundance—Jesus—standing right in front of him. He's so narrowly focused on his economic affairs that he has no bandwidth for the salvation Jesus offers. In his greed, he reduces the Son of God to an estate lawyer.

Meanwhile, Jesus looks at the rich landowner reveling in his stores of grain and sees a person drowning in self-absorption. A man enamored of his own power. A man oblivious to his own mortality. Notice the narcissism of his inner dialogue:
I will do this; I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry."

In this carefully worded narrative of a proud, self-made man, Jesus sees an isolated, insecure soul who has forgotten human connection, forgotten God's generosity and provision, forgotten that possession is not stewardship, and forgotten that in the face of death—the great equalizer—we are all naked paupers but for the grace of God.

It's tempting at this point to retreat into abstraction, into metaphor.

To say, "well this gospel lesson is not literally about money.

It's about my attitude towards money.

It's about my heart—it's about faith and hope, and love and joy!

Money itself is neither here nor there; money itself is morally neutral.

Well, yes.

But also no.

As I have pointed out in other sermons and in many bible studies,

Jesus talks about money and possessions more than any other topic.

Why do you think that is so?

Because there's something about it that distorts and corrupts us.

Something that makes us defensive.

Something that makes it very hard for us to hear the gospel in its risky, scandalous, impolite, imprudent, and radical fullness.

Something in its allure that grabs hold of us and doesn't easily let go.

After all—as last week's gospel lesson and sermon asked us—

How many of us pray,

Thy will be done on earth as in heaven and

Give us this day our daily bread—and really mean it?

Most of us have more than enough bread—and milk, cheese, fruit, vegetables, meat and ice cream in our refrigerators and freezers to last for weeks (and let's not even get into the amount of food that is wasted in this country when so many are hungry.)

How many of us really need to take material comfort in Jesus' words about God clothing the lilies of the field?

How many of us buy clothes we don't really need and end up hauling bags of barely worn clothing to Goodwill?

I confess that I don't keep in mind other people's needs today before I obsess over what I might need tomorrow.

All of this over consumption and waste exacts a cost—a cost on our planet's fragile ecology, a cost on the human beings who have to manage the fallout of thoughtless purchases, not to mention the cost on our souls.

Jesus concludes his lesson with an exhortation to be “rich toward God.” It's a beautiful and inspiring phrase, but what does it mean?

What does a heart and a lifestyle and a home and a bank account that is “rich toward God” look like?

Maybe, if we can infer from this gospel lesson, it means guarding against greed instead of obsessing over fairness.

Maybe it means holding our mortality closer than we want to.

Maybe it means asking hard questions about what makes us feel secure or insecure.

Maybe it means acknowledging that even our hard-earned, well-earned, so-called self-earned wealth comes ultimately from God and belongs to God.

Maybe it means prioritizing human interconnectedness over personal gain or asset management.

Maybe it means having a conversation with God and others more ardently than having a monologue with ourselves.

Could it mean we need to hold human wisdom lightly, knowing that God's wisdom will almost always render our own foolish?

God confronts the rich landowner in Jesus' parable with the most chilling words: *This very night your life is being demanded of you.*

Are we listening?

What would change about our financial lives if we really believed this?

What would we do differently if we believed that God does in fact demand our lives from us every single day, in every single way?

Because God our Lord does, right?

The call to take up my cross is a daily, hourly, minute by minute call.

I wonder, isn't it also a dollar-by-dollar-call?
If our lives have in fact been demanded of us, then how shall we live?
What do we leave behind?
What do we carry forward?
What do we give away or at the very least share?

Be rich toward God.

Don't shy away.

God grant us grace to be brave and wrestle with what this invitation means, because the richness we spend on God is the only richness we'll keep in the end.