

## “RICHES”

by Peter Gomes

*Fifth in a Lenten series on great preachers*

Psalm 130; Matthew 19:16-26

delivered by the Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

This of the story of the rich young ruler as we tend to remember it: conveniently and inaccurately. In the “shrinklit” version of the story—that is, in the version with all of the details, narratives, transitions, and important points left out—the story goes something like this. “A young Jewish yuppie has everything: he wants, as most yuppies want, more. He wants to be perfect. Jesus says he can’t be. The yuppie finds the one thing that money cannot buy. Jesus gives him his moral comeuppance, and more than this, Jesus says that all yuppies, or all Jewish yuppies in this context, will have a hard time getting into heaven.” End of story.

Matthew’s story of the Rich Young Man gives us reasons to dislike this young man intensely. First, he is rich. Most of us, fond as we might be of riches of our own, are not fond of those who have more riches than we have, and therefore it is not that we don’t like the rich in general, we just don’t like those who are richer than we are. It is probably inherited wealth anyway, and in the case of this rich young man, generational theft, as it is called, and it means or implies that he doesn’t have to work, which is another source of envy and discontent to those of us who do have to work. So he is rich: reason one to dislike him.

Reason number two: he is young. The older we get, the easier it becomes to despise the young. We know Mencken is right when he says, “Youth is wasted on the young, how fortunate that they won’t have it for very long.” There they are, these young people, look around at them, full of potency and potential and it is wasted in pleasure and diversion.

Our rich young man is rich, he’s young, and he’s a man, or a ruler, one and the same thing in this setting. He is a member of an exclusive club. He has the key to the executive washroom, and his father or his son, doubtless both, went to Harvard.

So much then for the rich young man, easily taken apart, easily ridiculed, easily held up to scornful examination by the daily talk-show hosts. The text and Jesus are considerably less harsh on this fellow than we are, however; and so, instead of what our perceptions tell us, let us see what the text tells us about this rich young man. We know straightaway that he is a virtuous man. He knows the law and he has kept it. “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments,” says Jesus. “Which ones?” asks the young man. “All of them,” says Jesus. Not seven out of ten, or every other one, or some winning combination as you choose, but all of them. That would silence most of us. “I have kept all of these,” says the young man. Now this is no small thing. This young man knows what is right, he knows the law, and he has kept it. He is good, he has done good, he has done all that can be asked, and, annoying as such manifest virtue may be, we cannot fault the boy with spiritual pride, for remember that this recital of his accomplishments is only extracted from him by Jesus, and is prefaced by two very important questions.

The first one is, “Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?” The second one, after this discourse has been concluded is, “What do I still lack?” What is still missing in my life. These

are not insincere questions. These questions do not suggest some kind of spiritual smugness or self-righteousness. They do not imply conceit or pride. Indeed, they cast this young man as one of the genuine spiritual seekers, genuinely bewildered, genuinely concerned, genuinely interested in his own salvation. With all that he has, with all he has done, with all that he is, he is still not satisfied. He is not satisfied, not because he is greedy but because he is incomplete and he knows it. The knowledge of that incompleteness is breaking his heart, and it brings him to Jesus. What am I lacking, what must I do, what do I need to fulfill my life? Having done all those things I was expected to do, all of the things I am able to do, having virtue and knowledge and wisdom and opportunity, I still can't make it? I have everything that life has to offer, and I still lack something. Note the poignancy of that one little word in the sentence: "What do I *still* lack?"

Those of you who have read the story know that here comes the punch line: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: then come and follow me."

The hard part here is not in selling your possessions, though that is difficult. The hard part here is in "come and follow me." "And when the young man heard this, he went away with a heavy heart for he was a man of great wealth." "Aha," we say. When it came down to doing something of practical worth and use, not just keeping the law and memorizing all that mumbo-jumbo and having abstract virtue, but when it came to giving his money away to the poor, he refused. Thus, we say, this is a story of greed, materialism, and misplaced values. End of story. That is where the young man exits, never to be heard from again. Yet it is exactly at that point where the story begins and where you and I enter into it.

Who of us willingly and easily and without a very heavy heart would give up that which is most dear to us in order to pursue some vague and aimless destiny with Jesus? The problem of the rich young man is not that he is not good, he is just not good enough. Or more to the point, goodness is not good enough.

His position is ours exactly. We try to be virtuous, you and I. We strive after ever more virtue. We may not always achieve it, we may not always have the right definition of what it is, but I am convinced that more often than not, more of us than not are striving after the good. I am convinced that most people still pursue the good insofar as they can discern it. They keep the laws, even stupid laws, as best they can. They do good works in the face of overwhelming ingratitude and inefficiency, and God help us all if those who do good works ceased to do them. We prize virtue, you and I, and we prize wisdom and knowledge. We are neither venal nor stupid. We may not be rich, but we all have things that enrich us and with which we would be unwilling to part. So that rich young man is not so far removed from our own particular place in time and circumstance.

To make sure that we understand that this is not simply about money and therefore applies only to those who have more than we have, translate the text "sell all your possessions and give to the poor" this way: ...give away your talent, your time, your brains, your looks, your board scores, your tenure, your partnership, your pension plan, your children, your spouse, your dreams, your ambitions. Give up all you have accomplished and all that people think of you, give up all of that and follow me.

This makes it painfully clear that it is not just about money and it's not just about those who have enough disposable income to dispose of it. It is about us. Since this is the case, you and I also would go away sorrowful for we, too, have many possessions. We, too, are wealthy in a variety of ways; and our sadness, like the rich young man's, is that now that we know what it takes to achieve that ultimate peace and perfection for which we do dearly long, we also know that we are unwilling to pay the price. I'll bet there is not one of us here who is willing to do that.

Sorrow, you see, is not the fruit of ignorance but the fruit of knowledge. We know but we are unwilling to do. We know, but we are unwilling to give up. We will hold on to these treasures like the drowning man in a shipwreck who holds on to his gold rather than let it go and grab a life preserver.

Here, of course, would be the neat little moral: you must lose in order to gain, and that may very well be where you expect this is going: another stewardship sermon in disguise. You must give in order to get. You must dispossess yourselves in order to possess treasure in heaven. But Jesus is not Khalil Gibran, given to pious maxims for tea bags. The disciples are amazing—the better translation is horrified—at the story. For if this young man of ability, promise, and achievement, who had everything going for him including modesty and spiritual ambition, if this young man could not be saved, in the words of the text, “Who then can be saved?” “Humanly speaking,” says Jesus, “it is impossible.” In rational, human, sociological, sensible, psychological, physiological, philosophical terms, nobody is going to do as Jesus directed, and therefore, because nobody is going to do it, nobody is going to be saved. We have no right to expect all of you to become like Mother Theresa. That is unrealistic, and you're not going to do it even if it was realistic. So, in human terms, if that is the criterion, nobody is going to be saved. “Humanly speaking,” says Jesus, “it is impossible, but with God anything is possible.”

Thank God salvation is God's business and not ours. Humanly speaking it is impossible, but with God anything is possible. Anything, including, perhaps, the salvation of the rich young man himself. Speculate on that in the large economy of God's salvation. Anything, including perhaps, your salvation and mine, despite our virtue, despite our wisdom, despite our riches, despite our knowledge, despite our fears. God saves us in spite of ourselves because of Godself. If God can make the universe out of nothing, think of what God can do with you and me. Humanly speaking, it is impossible, but with God anything is possible...” Even this.