

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Wisdom 7:7-11

Ps 89

Hebrews 4:12-13

Mark 10:17-30

I read a great little short story a while back by a writer named Andrew McNabb. The main character is a middle-aged fellow named Lance, who lives in a small working-class town in the north-eastern United States. Lance is very content with his simple life – he is happily married, and his wife Clara has been equally content with their life together.

However, Clara’s recently-divorced ex—a handsome fellow named Rob—has been around more of late. Ostensibly it’s to do with child support for the daughter he fathered with Clara back in the day, but Lance can’t help but notice that Clara seems to be acting a bit strange lately too. Even though Rob didn’t treat Clara very well when they were together—and eventually left her for a much younger woman—Lance wonders if Clara is starting to think wistfully of the more high-octane life she used to have with Rob.

To top it all off, Lance has just won the state lottery. He hasn’t told anyone about it yet, but he has a scratch-and-win ticket for a cool million dollars sitting in his pocket waiting to be redeemed. The small town is abuzz with excitement about the lottery, knowing that a local resident has won it, but not knowing who.

Lance is thinking of telling Clara about the money, but he doesn’t want to regain her waning affection just because of a lottery ticket. He’s not actually that fussed about the money – he just wants things to go back to how they were before Rob started complicating things.

So when Lance happens to see Rob at the local pub that morning, he gets an idea. When Rob goes to use the men’s room, Lance follows him in, takes out the ticket, and puts it down on the top of the urinal where Rob can see it, before walking out again. He then calls the local TV station to tell them that he knows the identity of the lottery winner, and gives them Rob’s name.

The story ends with Clara cuddling up to Lance on the couch as they watch TV. Rob has fled town looking for greener pastures without a second thought for Clara, as Lance knew he would. All is right with the world again, and Lance is once more a very contented man.

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Maybe you can see why I liked that story. Who of us would be able to do what Lance did – give up a million-dollar ticket because he knew he’d be happier without it?

Well that's essentially the same point that Jesus made to the rich young man in our Gospel today. "There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Jesus was offering the man something far more than mere material comfort – he was offering an answer for the deepest longings of his soul. But the young man couldn't do it – he couldn't do what Lance did in the story. He was too attached to his wealth. His wealth *literally got in the way* of him following Jesus.

Now remember, Jesus did not say this to the young man out of spite or as some kind of test. The text says that Jesus looked at him with great love before he said these words. He wasn't being a class warrior. He laid down this challenge *for the sake of the young man*. He knew that he would be happier if he took his advice.

What about us? How many times have we heard of people who are making good enough money, but take a higher paying job just because it is higher paying, even though their work hours, stress-levels, and overall quality of life suffers as a result?

I suspect that part of the reason why Jesus warns against the danger of riches, is that they have a way of warping our priorities. So we take the higher-paying job just because it is higher-paying, even if we can see that it will probably have the effect of making us more miserable. Greater wealth becomes the highest priority.

And our priorities matter – because a key part of being a saint is *wanting to be a saint*. The young man's wealth got in the way of him being able to feel his underlying hunger for what Jesus was offering. And obsession with wealth can drown out *our* own longing for the Lord.

Now, do I think we're all called to be a Saint Francis, and give away everything we own and live in radical dependence upon God? Probably not. And I'm not suggesting we should neglect our responsibilities as parents and stewards and so forth. But I also think we should be careful not to domesticate passages like this—to make them more palatable—before they have a chance to really shake up our lives.

Who knows? There may be a great saint in the making right here in front of me. Who am I to stand in their way, just because I am not living this out very well?

Of course, there have been saints who had been quite wealthy. It is possible to be extremely selfless with the material things we have been given. And it is possible for poor people to be extremely stingy and obsessed about the wealth they don't have.

Perhaps the underlying issue is not so much about wealth as it is one's disposition before God. Here's the question: Do we strive for self-sufficiency, or self-surrender? *Do we strive for self-sufficiency, or self-surrender?*

The desire for self-sufficiency is so primal in us, that it is given as the central premise of the story of the Fall in the book of Genesis. In Eden, Adam and Eve had everything they possibly needed – but they did not want to remain dependent on God – they wanted self-sufficiency, they wanted to be on level footing with God.

I suspect that the great danger of riches, is that they make it easier for us to think that we are indeed self-sufficient. God provides us with everything of course, beginning with life itself, but material comfort—being a “self-made man or woman”—can all-too-often distract or even blind us from this reality.

Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden before they could eat the fruit of the Tree of Life. And yet in the last chapter of the bible (Revelation 22), we are told that the Tree of Life is indeed to be our inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. But here’s the key – we must receive it as a gift, rather than grasp at it as though we deserve it.

So this morning/evening, let us strive to approach the Lord from our inner poverty. No matter what we have materially, we all stand in need of God’s love and mercy, which none of us can earn of our own accord.

Let us strive to surrender our will—perhaps our most valued possession—to God’s loving plan for us. If we do, he has promised us life in his kingdom, the riches of which surpass *everything* we could ever hope to acquire on our own.