

A STRANGE MELANCHOLY

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 18:18-30
A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
First Presbyterian Church
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Labor Day, the first Monday in September, is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. It constitutes a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity and well-being of our nation. In some years since the first Labor Day in 1882 the mood on the holiday has been celebratory and festive, in some years more somber and serious. This year probably inclines more toward the latter, given the state of the world and uncertainties about the global markets in a time of tariffs and protectionism and governmental unpredictability. Wages and salaries may be slightly up as a share of the nation's gross domestic product, but remain stubbornly slow, even as corporate profits have climbed, and the income gap has widened. As Patricia Cohen noted several weeks ago in the *Times*:

Throughout the recession and much of its aftermath, when many Americans were grateful to receive a paycheck instead of a pink slip, jobs and raises were in short supply. Now, complaints of labor shortages are as common as tweets. For the first time in a long while, workers have some leverage to push for more.

Yet many are far from making up all the lost ground. Hourly earnings have moved forward at a crawl, with higher prices giving workers less buying power than they had last summer. Last-minute scheduling, no-poaching and noncompete clauses, and the use of independent contractors are popular tactics that put workers at a disadvantage. Threats to move operations overseas, where labor is cheaper, continue to loom.¹

So, maybe the country isn't in the best frame of mind this year to reflect on the results of our labors, nor is this the best time, perhaps, to hear that we still live amid unprecedented abundance in this land. But we do. Then, maybe we aren't quite in the best place to hear that, even in such prosperity, there is an unprecedented gap between those who have benefited from such abundance and those who have not. But the gap is real and increasingly wide. And I know it is something that troubles the consciences of many of us here.

Presbyterians, as a group, more often than not are named among those who have benefited from the prosperity and abundance of this nation. Statistically, we are more likely to represent the managers and the beneficiaries of the labors of others than the

¹ Patricia Cohen, "Paychecks Lag as Profits Soar, and Prices Erode Wage Gains," New York Times, July 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/13/business/economy/wages-workers-profits.html>, accessed August 14, 2018.

hourly workers themselves. There are exceptions, to be sure; there are among us here at First Church people who live frugally and carefully from paycheck to paycheck, or on a fixed income, praying that no unexpected costs will throw their tight financial planning into chaos, praying also that fluctuations in the market or possible outsourcing to other nations will not cost them their jobs. But many of us discovered in the market growth and expansion of the 1990s or in the sector growth in more recent years personal resources we had not ever imagined before then... some of us exponentially so. The question is: has that prosperity translated into a greater peace of mind, a greater happiness?

Maybe so. Maybe not. I was struck not long ago while rereading some poignant words written about the American experience with freedom and wealth. They weren't written *recently*. They were penned by the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville after he had toured America in the 1830s. He said,

[People] easily attain a certain equality of condition, but they can never attain as much as they desire. It perpetually retires before them, yet without hiding itself from their sight, and in retiring draws them on.... They are near enough to see its charms, but too far off to enjoy them; and before they have fully tasted its delights, they die. That is the reason for the strange melancholy that haunts inhabitants of democratic countries in the midst of abundance.²

What caught my eye was that phrase, "strange melancholy." It seems odd in such a context, and yet I have to say that my experience in listening to folks talk about their experience of abundance confirms Tocqueville's observations. "Tocqueville thought that envy and longing were built into American life: that Americans suffered from the illusion that equality could eradicate their envy and prosperity and could quench their yearning for happiness. These were illusory hopes, he believed, because 'the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart.'"³ Desire for and even the acquisition of worldly goods, argued Tocqueville, *generates* melancholy rather than cures it.⁴

When Jesus told the rich ruler that his way to eternal life would require him to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, Luke records that the man was overcome with melancholy, or something close to it. "He became sad," said Luke, "for he was very rich." He became sad, because Jesus asked him to dispose of his riches. But my guess is that he had already found some deep melancholy in his life that brought him to Jesus in the first place.

Sadness, melancholy afflicts many people in the midst of abundance. But why? In part, I suspect, because enough is never *enough*... and in part, because additional resources create additional worries and responsibilities. And further, I suspect, because we know too well the economic disparities that separate us from other people in this

² Alexis Tocqueville, cited by Miroslav Volf in "Diminished," *Christian Century*, August 16-23, 2000, 837.

³ Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999, 3.

⁴ Volf, cf. note 3.

world... and because there are deeper desires and hungers than all the luxury apartments and top-flight entertainment and fine dining in the world can ever touch.

But we haven't figured it out yet. When I was cleaning out my study last year when I retired, I came across a copy of that little book, *The Prayer of Jabez*. Do you remember it? That little volume sat atop the best-seller lists for a number of weeks, and even garnered an invitation for its author, Bruce Wilkinson, to be the speaker at the White House celebration of the National Day of Prayer one year. By the time of my retirement, I had almost forgotten about it. The book itself was based on a decidedly shaky interpretation of a brief prayer voiced by a minor character, named Jabez, in the fourth chapter of 1 Chronicles. The prayer of Jabez is a self-focused prayer of greed, asking that God would increase his land (enlarge his territory) and keep him from harm. The fact that millions of Americans found in such unabashed greed a basis for spiritual development is something I still find astonishing (and frankly, downright depressing).

Tucked into the pages of the book I also found a copy of Kenneth Woodward's scathing review of it. Woodward was *Newsweek's* respected religion writer at the time, and he said, it would have been time better spent if folks had simply read "any verse from the Book of Psalms, or the prayers Jesus himself recited, which ask only for forgiveness and the grace to do God's will."⁵ I might add the parable of the rich ruler and its reminder of what our best prayer might be.

Please don't misunderstand me. There is much good that wealth can make possible in the world, in the church, as Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett, Michael Bloomberg, and even LeBron James have certainly demonstrated; though as Elizabeth Kolbert noted in *The New Yorker* last week, the wealth of the new donor class poses its own problems. As the tax-exempt foundations flourish, the tax losses to the U.S. Treasury keep mounting. And instead of promoting equality, the tax subsidies for the philanthropy may actually be doing the reverse. Kolbert cites as a "for instance" the fact that a hundred-million-dollar gift to Harvard will still be fully deductible under the recent tax law, but the property taxes paid to support local public schools will not be. "It is possible that in the not-too-distant future philanthropic giving will outstrip federal outlays on non-defense discretionary programs, like education, and the arts. [Kolbert asks earnestly,] Is that the kind of future we want?"⁶

Abundance is a good thing, but abundance creates its own problems. It also presents perils to the human spirit...lures and dangers that can separate us from God and one another. A pastoral colleague of mine, named Bill, discovered that lure first-hand a few years ago when he received word that his uncle had died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 60. A few weeks after his uncle's death, Bill received a certified letter saying that his uncle's will had been read, and since his uncle had never married, a sizeable portion of his estate had been left to his nine nieces and nephews, of which Bill was one. Now, you should know that Bill, along with his brother, his father and two other uncles

⁵ Kenneth Woodward, *Newsweek*, August 27, 2001, 47.

⁶ Elizabeth Kolbert, "Shaking the Foundations: Are the new donor cases solving our problems or posing new ones?" *The New Yorker*, August 27, 2018, 30-34.

had become Presbyterian ministers. But his Uncle Richmond had gone in a different direction and had made money...lots of it... enough so that at the time of his death his estate was worth several million dollars. So, Bill did his calculations and figured out that even one ninth of that estate would amount to a good chunk of change.

There was, Bill said, a lot of rejoicing around his house over his uncle's generosity. Instantly there was talk of a new car, of a long-postponed family vacation, of college possibilities. (Bill said his family overlooked the fact that he alone was named in the will, and that he hadn't decided whether to make his family the beneficiaries of his largesse.) Nonetheless, in the midst of all the rejoicing and speculating and before-the-fact spending, it occurred to Bill one day that another voice was whispering inside him, a voice he had long proclaimed with confidence, a voice which beckoned him, "Come, follow me." He said, we had been treating the prospect of riches as such a good thing, but this alternative voice seemed to be saying to him, "Be careful. Here is that which can separate you from God."

And so, Bill told his congregation, "What I really need from the community of faith is for you to keep reminding me of the danger of wealth and possessions, how they have a way of separating us from God. [I need *you* to tell me, because] it is a message I don't hear anywhere else. Outside of this place all any of us hear is what a wonderful thing money is. Only here, only among people of faith, do I hear the other side, that although money can be used as a blessing of God, it also possesses great destructive power if not spent and shared with wisdom and compassion."⁷

Popular wisdom says that wealth and poverty are antonyms – opposites. But the wisdom of Christ suggests that wealth and poverty are synonyms, the opposite of which is community. In a community of grace and sharing, we learn what richness really looks like.

Some of you here are old enough to remember the comedy of Jack Benny, who made a fortune portraying a character whose stinginess and frugality was legendary. In one of his classic sketches a mugger emerged from the darkness, stuck a pistol in Benny's ribs, and said: "Your money or your life!" There was a lengthy pause, and the mugger once again jabbed the pistol tight against Benny's ribs and said, "Well?" To which Benny replied, "I'm thinking! I'm thinking!"

There is a sense in which Jesus' words about riches provide an invitation to just such a choice, though in a much more positive vein. More than warning and demand, there is here an invitation. Follow me, he beckons, and let me show you a new way of life, in which you are not possessed by your possessions, but are open to the movement of God's spirit. Follow me, be done with the endless quest for a security that will always elude you and let me show you a new security that moth and rust cannot destroy. Follow me, let go of your old assumptions about value and worth, and let me show you a life of great value, where you won't be had by what you have. Follow me, and be done with your lonely, acquisitive, melancholy pursuits, and discover the richness of life lived in

⁷ Bill Williamson, in a paper presented to the January 1989 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Atlanta.

genuine community. More than command, Jesus' word is an invitation... a way out of melancholy to a fuller peace and contentment.

Rudyard Kipling, the English poet, speaking to a graduating class at Canada's McGill University some years ago, advised the graduates not to care too much for money or power or fame, for, he said, "Someday you will meet a [person] who cares for none of these things – and then you will know how poor you are."⁸

That's what happened to the rich ruler, who, in the presence of Christ, discovered his own poverty of spirit. Luke says he was sad, full of melancholy that day. Luke doesn't mention him again, doesn't say what happened to him, but I can't help but wonder if Jesus' words ever got through the protective trappings of the man's abundance. I wonder if, in the end, he didn't decide he'd had enough of melancholy and it was time to relinquish... and to follow. Maybe he did. Maybe he didn't. Forget about him. What about you?

⁸ As cited by Dale Turner, *The Seattle Times*, November 11, 2000.