Non-Traditional Values

Second Sunday in Lent 2020

Matthew 6:19-34

*Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

*Matthew 6:33, Common English Version*

Two of the more interesting characters formerly in the democratic presidential race are a couple of pretty rich men, Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg. Well, Steyer did drop out after the South Carolina primary, Bloomberg after the Super Tuesday this past week. Nevertheless, Steyer and Bloomberg are counted among the richest persons in the world, billionaires both. Each came into their considerable wealth in different ways. They both spent millions in their attempt to become the democratic nominee for the presidency. It is estimated that Bloomberg has spent $500 million so far, and if he had gotten further, had threatened to spend even more. One cannot accuse him of not putting his money where his mouth is, whatever your criticism of him may be.

As we continue our journey through the Sermon on Mount, we encounter Jesus’ teaching on money and wealth. More accurately, his teaching on our attitudes toward material things.

As we look closely at what he teaches, I remind you about who is in Jesus’ outdoor classroom. This is not the weekly meeting of the millionaires’ club. Heck, it’s not even the monthly Rotary meeting. Jesus’ audience is composed of the poor and the nearly poor. These students are folks living paycheck to paycheck, one bad crop away from being homeless, one bad illness away from begging on the streets. No Tom Steyer or Michael Bloomberg in this outdoor classroom.

Yet, Jesus audaciously teaches them not to be concerned even for the bare necessities of life: *what you shall eat or what you shall drink; the blue jeans you wear to work.* Really, Jesus? If I am not concerned about these basic elements of life, am I to be a lazy bum, not working or earning my keep? Am I being encouraged to live off of a welfare check from the government?

Well, of course not. But then, if not, what kind of life is Jesus encouraging me to live?

Jesus’ underlying assumption is about the power that money and wealth have over each of us. It is so powerful that money vies with God for the primary place in our hearts and for our ultimate allegiance. *You cannot serve God and wealth,* Jesus adamantly insists*.* Jesus recognizes the problem of possessions for his first-century audience. He challenges people to take a position on wealth, a potential threat to God. You cannot serve God and wealth. In this regard, he operates in the spirit of the prophet Amos, among other spokespersons in the Bible.  The power of this alternative god of wealth and material things is as real today as it was in the first century.  Wealth competes with God for the human heart.  Capitalism, the very economic system in which we live, is one of the serious challenges for contemporary Christians.  When we fail to recognize the class divisions our economic system perpetuates, we distort the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer.  The language of forgiveness -"forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” - is understood falsely as only an internal spiritual condition rather than an external action of debt relief.

Jesus truly understands the intoxicating power money can have over people. I want to remind you: the people to whom Jesus was speaking had to strive to put a roof over their heads. Many did not know where their next meal was coming from. So, he knew full well they had to strive to make ends meet. He was not oblivious to nor unsympathetic to them. *Your Heavenly Father knows you have need of these things,* Jesus reminds them.

What should we make of Jesus’ teaching here? Well, here is what I believe he is telling us about our attitude towards material wealth.

First, your poverty should not be for you a source of shame, embarrassment, or humiliation. Let us be clear here: **Jesus does not romanticize poverty**. As a poor person himself, he knew from experience what poverty entailed. He understood how poverty could rob someone of their sense of self respect or dignity. As the delightful Tevye says to God in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “I know, I know, it’s no shame to be poor, but it’s no great honor, either.”

Rather, what Jesus teaches, in Luke’s version of the beatitude, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Not “poor in spirit,” but “poor.” In the economic system under which Jesus lived, rich people were not rich because they were better, smarter, more blessed than others, but because the way things operated, the system favored them. It was the rich got richer and poor poorer. Not much different than capitalism – or any other system – in our day, is it. As Jesus tells us, [the rich] have their reward. They get exactly what they work for, give their life for, sell their soul for.

So, what do the poor get, so much so that Jesus pronounces them blessed? Well, they get what liberation theologians call God’s “preferential option for the poor.” God favors the poor over the rich. God will look out for the poor.

Which brings me to my second point: If God will look out for you, take care of you, and you truly believe it, that faith will allow you to live more fully, in gratitude, serving God. This is the lesson of the sparrow and the lilies. They are living as they were created to live, to soar in the sky and to bring beauty into the world. And God looks after them.

And us? We are created to live under the reign of God. That is how we are made. It is in our DNA. If we strive after material wealth on the other hand, we will get exactly what we strive for. But it goes against our nature, the way we are created, and will lead to our eventual demise.

Seek first to live under the reign of God and God’s righteousness, and all the things you need, God will take care of. Isn’t that a liberating promise? Just do what you were created to do: love God and your neighbor; love your enemies; don’t retaliate evil for evil; all the other things Jesus teaches. And your reward will be the providential care of God.

An afterthought: I believe this holds true for us as a church community as well. If we live faithfully, seek God’s reign, God will take care of us as well. May it be so.