

Counting Blessings
Mark 10:17-31
October 14, 2018 – Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Friends, I struggle with the passage that you just heard more than any passage in the entire Bible. I told you a few weeks ago about being in a seminar and studying this passage. One of the professors in the group commented, “Professors don’t need to worry about this. We’ll never be rich.” To that, the seminar leader responded, “Maybe compared to your immediate neighbors that’s true; but, compared to the average person on this planet, we are all very rich.” I have never forgotten that. No, I’m not rich by Northeast Ohio standards. I’ve very solidly in the middle-class; but, by the standards of the world, I am indeed very rich.

In our children’s moment, I highlighted the book *If the World Were a Village*. This book compares the world proportionately to a village of 100 people to put things into perspective. Hear again, if the world were a village of 100 people, the richest 10 people or 10% of the world’s population would have nearly 85 percent of the world’s wealth, each making more than \$87,500/year. The poorest 10 percent would make less than \$2.00/day. Half the people average about \$6.00/day. The average cost of food, shelter and other necessities world-wide is more than \$5000/year, and many people cannot meet these needs. Indeed, we are all very rich.

A few weeks back, a 37 year old lady came to the church looking for financial help. She and her seven and eight year old daughters are living in their car, which had a broken strut and leaky brake lines. She has significant medical difficulties and has applied for Social Security disability. She is currently appealing her first rejection letter. She has applied for CMHA housing; but has been told it will be three months until her application interview. Now, I gave the lady a little help for gasoline out of the discretionary fund, and I recommended another area church that I knew could help her with food; and she was extremely grateful. But I also knew the little help we were able to give would not last very long. She left the office; I looked at Megan and said, “Megan, we are very blessed.”

I don’t like to quote Shakespeare in sermons, but that scene from Hamlet sometimes rings loudly in my head: “There, but for the grace of God go I.” I remember sitting in a seminary class now nearly twenty years ago. A fellow student said, “Let’s face it, we’re all just one paycheck away from being homeless.” I said nothing; but I thought about how blessed I am. I’m not rich by American standards; but I could miss several paychecks without being homeless.

And so I struggle with today's scripture. Oh, Ginny and I give more than our 10% tithe to churches; and we significantly support some other charities. But we still live a very comfortable lifestyle. By world standards, we are still very rich. Should we be doing more? Should we be giving more?

Now please don't hear that this is a source of great anxiety. It's not. I don't obsess over my blessings. I simply give thanks for my blessings; and I read the admonishment of the rich man in context. When Jesus says it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, the disciples are shocked; and they ask, "Then who can be saved?" And Jesus responds, "It's impossible for human beings, but not for God; for God, all things are possible."

You see, once again it's about grace. Once again it's about the love of God. No, I may not sell everything I have and give all the money to the poor. I may lead a very comfortable lifestyle. And still I know that God loves me. "Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so." The greatest news in the world is that we have a loving and merciful God. The greatest gift in the world is the gift of God's love as exemplified in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I will receive salvation. All of you will receive salvation. With God, all things are possible because God loves you and God loves me.

So where does this all leave us. It's all about stewardship. As we head into our stewardship campaign next week, the common offering response rings in my ears: "We give thee but thine own. What ere' the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone, a trust Oh Lord from thee."

Friends, everything, all creation belongs to God; and, you and I and all God's people are called to care for God's creation. God did not give creation to us. God did not give our wealth to us. No, God put it in our care. That's why I feel so strongly about our care of the environment. It's not our environment. It's God's environment. God has simply given us the charge to care for it. God has not given it to us to use for selfish purposes. God has not given it to us to enhance our personal wealth. (It's not our wealth anyway; it's God's wealth.) But God has charged us to care for God's environment for our children and their children and their children, as the Native Americans say "down to the seventh generation."

I am very convinced that God never wants God's people to suffer. So, many of us are truly blessed. But I am also convinced that many of us are extremely blessed so that we can be a blessing to others. I've quoted Theresa of Avila before: "Christ has no hands but your hands; Christ has no feet but your feet." I could take that one step further and state that Christ has no money but your money.

Now, once again, I feel like I'm preaching to the proverbial choir. When people ask me about this congregation, I tell them, "Our congregation is extremely generous with both their time and their money."

Some of you may know that our church is involved in a Cohort of Smaller Churches in East Ohio Conference that are seeking to strengthen their youth programs. Five of us are spending approximately one Saturday every other month meeting at the Conference Office to discuss processes and programs, and we hold conference calls and church meeting in between our Saturday meetings. The common complaint heard by every church involved in the cohort is the challenge of getting volunteers; and I need to say that our church is not an exception in that. I've stated before, I have a clergy friend who tells his congregation, "Christians do not volunteer; Christians seek ways to serve." Indeed, part of stewardship is time. And so, I ask, "How are you serving? Are you continually seeking new ways to serve? Are you trying new ideas? How are you spending your time for Christ?"

Then there *is* the financial aspect. Indeed we are all blessed. How will you use your blessings to be a blessing to others. Note that, despite what Jesus told the rich man, I don't think God wants you to give *everything* away. Parables tend to be extreme. That's part of the definition of a parable. I don't want anyone to play the widow who gave her last two copper coins to the church. But I do hope that each of you will join me in assessing your blessings. How has God blessed you? How can you use those blessings to be a blessing to others? Join me in prayerfully considering your blessings as we move through our stewardship campaign this fall. Then, on our Stewardship Sunday, November 11th, join in doing all you can for the furtherance of God's Kingdom through the work of this church as we reach out to share the Good News of God's amazing love with God's people everywhere.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,
We thank you and we praise you
 for the many blessings you have given us.
Lead us and guide us
 that we might use every blessing
 to be a blessing to others.
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
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