

## **“If I Were a Rich Man ...”**

**Amos 6:1a, 4-7; I Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31; Psalm 146; 9-30-07**

I am sure most of us recognize the title of this sermon as coming from a song by the same name from “Fiddler on the Roof.” In the song, Tevye bemoans the fact that he is a poor man and plays the game many of us do, imagining what it is he would do and have if he had a lot of money. He sings about having a fine big house, a happy wife and respect from important people in town. These “important people” would ask his advice about many things and he says, “And it won’t make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong, When you’re rich they think you really know.”

After listing all of his desires and objectives, he goes on to say, “If I were rich, I’d have the time that I lack—To sit in the synagogue and pray. And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall. And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all.” As I re-read the words to this song, I thought, “He’s got it. He’s really got it.” He does know what would be truly valuable and what would give balance to his life.

Now you might think I am giving too much credence to a Broadway musical and, perhaps, I am, but I know some people who are very wealthy people. The ones that have found the most value and contentment in life are those who manage to keep their lives in balance. One woman, with whom I am very close, has managed a lot of money for a lot of years. Her father earned it the old-fashioned way, through lots of hard work. He started a small business in his home when she was a baby, persisted in building it until it merged with another company and then was bought out by an internationally known business. His efforts and timing in life amassed a fortune, which he left to his only child. Throughout his life, my dear friend saw her father be a good and generous steward of all God had given him. She has continued to sow good seeds in her community, in our country and in the world as she has worked her way through life. I cannot even begin to count the lives she has touched and made better because of her assistance. Almost always she has bestowed her gifts anonymously.

She is not the only person of wealth I know. I met several in my brief tour of duty as Development Director with the National Association. I was astonished at how often someone would hear of a pressing need and simply sit down and write a check needing no trumpets to herald their good and generous work. These were and are people who understand that “It” is not all about them.

Two of our scripture readings for this morning speak rather harshly about the rich. But, if we consider these readings carefully, we see that they only speak this way about those wealthy people who have no concern or consideration for others. They speak about those who are arrogant about their status in life and do not hesitate to measure others against it while looking down their noses at them. I don’t know about you but I find these people hard to take as they continually remind me just who they are and how important they are to the wheels of progress. Quite often, on closer examination of these folks, we discover that the “emperor, or empress has no clothes.” Or, that there is no real wizard behind the curtain.

Amos warns such people that the end for them and their lifestyle is near. Rarely does he urge them to reform. He believed the people knew what they had to do—they had a tradition of righteousness they needed to revive. Amos spoke out against social injustice in his culture. There had been a breakdown of the old tribal and family systems of landownership and a wealthy class had emerged at the top of society. This led to great divisions and suffering for the poor as the rich just got richer. These are the people he spoke of in this reading.

Then there is the parable Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man learned, too late, that he had opportunities during his earthly life to learn the right way to live. He had neglected his education in this vital area and was paying for this neglect in the afterlife. He wanted his brothers to avoid his same fate. But, in this story, Abraham reminded him that they had Moses and the prophets to steer them onto the right pathway, just as he had them. His brothers needed to learn their own lessons. No special help could be sent to them because even if someone were resurrected from the dead they would not believe it. They were, evidently, a hardheaded lot that would pursue the way they had chosen without any modifications. Their fate was in their own hands. This little story certainly echoes the words and sentiments of Amos.

It is up to the author of the First Letter to Timothy to offer some hope to people of wealth. Both of the little Letters to Timothy are full of instructions for leading a Christian life. While originally written for pastors, the guidelines apply to all of us.

After the author warns that “the love of money is a root of all evil” because it leads people desiring to be rich away from all that is valuable in life, he points to the way people of means should pursue. People of means are to do good deeds and be generous. By doing this they will build up a treasure for their future life. They will not end up like the rich man begging for some water to cool his burning tongue.

So, what does this all say to us? That no matter what our state may be in life, blessed by wealth or not, we are all equal in the mind and heart of God. That equality cannot be bought, it simply is. If we get twisted out of shape pursuing the god of money and neglecting things that have a far higher value, there will be some day when it all will catch up with us. Money, while a wonderful tool to help us obtain the necessities of life, cannot buy us love or friendship, or honor or decency. When used improperly it only separates people one from the other and creates resentments that often grow causing sad and painful lives. Nothing can be sadder than children waiting for a wealthy parent to die so that his or her money can be theirs.

So, the next time you walk around singing “If I were a rich man,..” remember the balance Tevye wanted in his life—a balance of the good things along with the things of a spiritual nature. Then consider where the true riches in your own life lie and seek the contentment that comes from leading a decent life based on the teachings we so honor.

-- Amen