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Job 23:1-9, 16-17, Mark 10:17-31
“Wealth Management”

Russ Alan Prince on the Forbes website states, “Wealth management is very straightforward. From the affluent individual’s perspective, wealth management is simply the science of solving/enhancing his or her financial situation.”

Wealth management involves those who have a lot of money. According to Investopedia online, it is “a high-level professional service that combines financial/investment advice, accounting/tax services, retirement planning and legal/estate planning for one fee. Clients work with a single wealth manager who coordinates input from financial experts and can include coordinating advice from the client's own attorney, accountants and insurance agent. Some wealth managers also provide banking services or advice on philanthropic activities.”

I suspect there was no wealth management, as we know it today in Bible times. Nevertheless, a rich man in today’s story looks to Jesus to solve his financial situation from a spiritual point of view. “How can I balance my wealth with my spirituality,” he might be asking. Jesus discerns it this way from his response.

The man asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies, “You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” The rich man replies, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus looks at him lovingly and says, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” The man was shocked. He departed grieving because he had many possessions.

Instead of spiritual management, Jesus offers wealth management of the most radical kind. For this man, there is no holding on to wealth and giving money on the side in the form of benevolences and philanthropy.

Jesus tells his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God...It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” I read somewhere that “camel” refers to camel hair, which was the thickest kind.

I have no idea why Jesus told this rich man that he must sell all. Surely, he does not intend for the wealthy to be as poor as those they are trying to help. Jesus’ disciples

are surprised with his words and say, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus provides a saving answer, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." In this, rich people have a way out. As a spiritual person, there are ways to manage your wealth. They set up a trust account with God and the account has two clauses.

First, the wealthy must have a radical concern for the poor. The challenge to the rich man in the story is emblematic of that. We do not know whether he sold what he owned and gave to the poor. All we know is that Jesus challenged him to do so. Was it because the rich have a tendency to be ruled by their riches where to be rich becomes an obsession and can be self-serving? By placing the focus on the poor, Jesus turns the priorities of the rich on its head. One does not think of becoming richer but poorer for the sake of the poor.

Jesus might be asking some to sell what they own but that only comes with the proviso that they follow him. The implication here is that one is never poor when one follows Jesus. One has seen this practically in missionaries, professionals who give up their riches gained in these professions to serve God in the mission field with little or no pay but their riches are immeasurable. Some might experience persecution, even death, but that comes with the risk of mission and thanks to God for these brave ones. One thinks of Catholic nun, Dorothy Stang, who spoke out against rich cattle farmers in Brazil in support of the poor whose small land was taken. Her car was stopped in a lonely country road by three men. When she got out of her car with Bible in hand, she was shot and killed.

Mission is affirmed in the text when Peter says, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life."

The challenge to give to the poor and to follow Jesus is the challenge to every Christian to prioritize the poor in everything they do. It does not mean giving up on a rich cultural life. It means more pro bono as a doctor and lawyer, it means going beyond benevolent giving and philanthropy to ethical business practices, it means creating a society where mostly poor don't land in prison, it means stopping business practices that pollute regions and rivers that effect mostly the poor. Green investing is a good sustainable practice and thus honors the earth.

Robert Reich, Chancellor's Professor of Public Policy at UC Berkeley and Senior Fellow at the Blum Center for Developing Economics, wrote in the San Francisco Chronicle Insight Section last Sunday that, "Fifty years ago, when General Motors was the largest employer in America, the typical GM worker, backed by a strong union, earned \$35 an

hour in today's dollars. Now America's largest employer is Walmart, and the typical entry-level Walmart worker, without a union, earns about \$9 an hour. Another article in the same section addresses male poverty in the US. Suellen and I read the Mission Yearbook for Study and Prayer and we cannot believe the number of regions in the US where people go hungry.

Reich lists a variety of ways where a disproportionate amount of wealth is concentrated in the top echelons of society. He writes that the answer to this problem is not found in economics. It is found in politics. With the election season upon us, Jesus challenges us to consider candidates that have the most consideration for the poor in their platforms.

Roman Catholic liberation theology calls this a "preferential option for the poor." We become advocates for the poor because the poor cannot advocate for themselves.

The second clause in our trust with God is affirmed in the statement that with God all things are possible. This means that we hold our wealth always within a God frame of reference. Whoever coined "In God We Trust" had this in mind when deciding to print this motto on the dollar bill. I wish every person in the US held his or her money in the spirit of this motto. There are other religions with other names for God or their sense of ultimacy and they too can trust their highest power in their use of their money.

Christians have a long tradition of stewardship. We care for the ways we use God's resources, our time, talents and our finances. We do not like to waste these things. We are stewards of the earth. God has bestowed all these things upon us and we use them efficiently and wisely. The rich are especially privileged with their riches and in spending their riches in God-given ways, lots of it, especially the so-called one percenters, then they and the world will experience salvation.

Our membership of this church, and the same goes for many churches, is a God-given gift to us. It is the place of salvation in multitude of ways, one of which is our generous giving to many mission causes. We are cognizant of and support the poor and needy. To be active in the church is one of the best ways to keep us connected to God, to each other and to a needy world.

The issue of wealth for a rich righteous person is not how much money one has but how faithful one is. That's the message of the Book of Job. The church included the passage as a reading today to juxtapose it with the gospel story of the rich man. Job is an extremely rich man and the devil in the story assumes power over him with God's permission to reduce him to poverty and illness and in so doing to test his faithfulness. Job remains faithful and God restores his wealth. The issue then becomes how Job and the rest of the rich manage their wealth.

Jesus' challenge to the rich man in the gospel story is better taken as related to his particular case than as a general principle of Christian life or even as the basis of a superior religious state. The chief theological teachings are that wealth can be an obstacle to discipleship and that the rewards of discipleship are infinitely greater than the sacrifices.

We began with the definition of wealth management. In the best cases, wealth management is wise counsel to maintain a healthy portfolio where money and resources remain the same or increase. This kind of management benefits an individual or family. Christian wealth management benefits the poor. Christians with wealth have an enormous responsibility. Through prayer and discernment they can use their influence and wealth to do great things for the realm of God. In this manner, they inherit eternal life. Amen.