

Thank you, Gwen, for sharing with us about how the love of your life guided you to this community and how St. Thomas has made a difference in your life.

It's hard not to be struck by the oddness of Jesus' kingdom, as he states that "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." This isn't the first time Jesus' has made such statements. Earlier, Jesus said that those who want to save their life will lose it while those who lose their lives for the gospel will save it. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus announces that the kingdom of God upends most of our normal conventions.

And maybe that's the point. God's kingdom is so totally different that we have a hard time fitting it into our usual categories.

The gospel raises questions about our relationship to money and it makes us uncomfortable (or at least it should). I love church: don't you? Church is one of the last places where we can talk about difficult topics such as our relationship to money.

So let's go there. In and of itself, money is not bad. Yet, influenced by the culture we live in, we're just prone to attach *way too much importance to it*. I'm not trying to romanticize poverty. Christians should, I believe, be working to eliminate poverty and to help those in need at every turn. Rather, we live in a culture that values the accumulation of wealth over just about anything.

The situation in Jesus' day was similar. Wealth was considered a sign of God's blessing, poverty a sign of God's disfavor. (And in our own day, we've seen a rise in some religious groups preaching a "prosperity gospel"). But what if wealth is neither good nor bad on its own? What if it's what we do with wealth (or the lack of it) that really matters? Then perhaps the issue Jesus is addressing isn't primarily wealth *per se*, but our disposition toward it. Perhaps he is warning – the rich man, his disciples, and us – that while wealth can be used for good or ill, it is nevertheless a powerful entity in our world.

Wealth can provide us with everything we need...  
*and it can insulate us from the needs of others.*

Wealth can secure for us a safe home...  
*and delude us into thinking that it is the source of our security.*

Wealth can ensure that we never go hungry...  
*but it cannot prevent us from being lonely or leading lives devoid of meaning or purpose.*

Wealth is, well, just wealth, morally neutral...and also dangerous. The challenge is living in a culture that focuses on all wealth's potential without heeding its perils.

Wealth can provide us with all our material needs – and this really matters! – but the danger is believing that it can also tend to our spiritual and eternal needs.

Jesus suggests that there are many who are first in terms of the categories of the world – power, prestige, wealth – may be surprised to discover that these things count for little in the kingdom of God and will make entrance into the kingdom more difficult simply because of how wealth can make us blind to our deepest spiritual needs as well as to the very real material needs of others.

There is a warning here...and also a promise. The promise is that God loves us apart from our wealth and accomplishments. God makes room especially for those who are considered of little account by the world. Many who are considered last, at the bottom, and of no importance will find themselves first.

Here is God's promise: there is room for *all* in the kingdom; entrance isn't conditional on our accomplishments or our character but solely on one's need.

Listen again to those words we prayed: *Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works...* In other words, keep us mindful of our need and the needs of others, that we may care for them as we have been cared for. Are we cultivating that relationship of trust? How do we say “thank you” to the love of our life in a meaningful way?

Jesus said, “where your treasure is there your heart will be also.” Where are your priorities in life? I invite you to make an annual pledge toward the life changing work that we are a part of together through St. Thomas' Church. Think of all God has accomplished through us in the past year and how we have tasted God's reign among us. Make your offering with the joy and confidence knowing that you are loved more than you can imagine, that you are worthy of that love and respect, and that God will use you and me to change the world.

*The Rev. Paul Briggs  
21st Sunday After Pentecost, 13 October 2024  
St. Thomas' Church, Camden, Maine*