Rich in the Sight of God

NRS Luk 12:13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide
the family inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge
or arbitrator over you?" 15 And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all
kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." 16 Then he
told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to
himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'I will
do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my
grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for
many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very
night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will
they be?' 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich
toward God."

Eric Beinhocker is an economist and a senior advisor with McKinsey and Co. Fortune named him as THE business leader of the next century. Wow. Beinhocker opens his fantastic book, The Origin of Wealth, with this really interesting story about the importance perspective plays in thinking about wealth. He was traveling in Africa, in Kenya, where he had a meeting with a tribe of Maasai tribesmen. He writes: "I sat perched on a small ledge, with my back pressed against a dung wall, in the smoky center room of a thatched hut belonging to an elderly Maasai tribesman…The elder, with his wise, weather-beaten face and sharp eyes, had been asking me polite questions about my family and where I came from. Now he wanted to get the measure of me. He fixed his gaze on mine across the cooking fire and asked, "How many cattle do you own?" I paused for a moment and then quietly replied, "None."…There was a murmur around the small room as various members of the village, curious about the stranger, digested this piece of information. After a few moments' consideration, the elder replied, "I am very sorry for you." But the pity evident in his voice and on his face was also tinged with puzzlement as to how someone so poor could afford to travel such long distances and

own a camera. …Then I remembered I have an uncle who once owned a large herd of cattle on his farm in Maryland. There was then a quick nodding of understanding as the mystery was solved- the visitor was clearly the ne're-do-well nephew of a rich uncle, traveling and living off his relative's bovine wealth." (p. 3)

For the Maasai wealth equals cattle. The more cows you have, the wealthier you are. Period. This was such a basic fact in their lives, they couldn't even imagine that others might define wealth in different ways.

I wonder for you- what does it mean to be wealthy? I know we think about it- a quick romp through Borders or Amazon.com tells us that. I wonder if you feel wealthy or not this morning- or what it would look like for you to feel wealthy.

This is what the man is worried about who interrupts Jesus this morning. Here Jesus is teaching, he was just telling folks not to worry if they go to jail, that the Spirit will give them the words they need to defend themselves, when one guy decides the Spirit is already at work giving him something to say right then and there. And so he pipes up and shouts out to Jesus telling him to make his brother split his inheritance with them. He doesn't say it explicitly, but in so many words he's asking Jesus to help him become more wealthy.

Now, before you just completely shake your head at this and think this guy is just off his tree, it probably does make sense in the context of the day. This man is talking about his *older* brother, and, at least to most of us, this guy probably does get a raw deal. In his day inheritance was not a complicated thing with wills, trusts, and estate planning.

There are no probate courts. They have something called primogeniture in those days, which simply means the oldest living brother gets everything. Absolutely everything.

And so this poor guy, this younger brother, he's been listening to Jesus talk about sharing and sees how he lives with his disciples, sharing everything in common, and he likes what he sees and what he hears. He likes all this sharing. Indeed, especially in Luke, Jesus' teachings about money is tough. In Matthew Jesus just says blessed are the poor *in spirit*, and he doesn't even mention the rich. In Luke Jesus says blessed are the *poor*, and he adds, 'And woe to the rich for they have received their share." In Luke he tells the rich young man that if he wants to inherit the kingdom of heaven that he has to go away and sell everything that he has saying it's easier for a camel to get through a needle than it is for a rich man to get into heaven.

And so this younger brother is loving this. Jesus is all about sharing, right? He warns again and again about how being rich can be hazardous to your health, and so when Jesus catches his breath, this guy jumps in wanting Jesus to connect the dots about his teaching about wealth and this guy's situation. If we're supposed to share, and if being wealthy is a bad thing- then Jesus ORDER my brother to split his inheritance with me. Tell him he has to!

But this poor younger brother, and being a younger brother I am sympathetic, but this poor younger brother makes an enormous mistake here, doesn't he? He assumes he and Jesus agree with what it means to be wealthy. Indeed, he makes the mistake, the mistake I still hear in the church today, that Jesus is some kind of tool that will help us become more wealthy in the eyes of the world, when of course he's something entirely

different: namely the very power of God that opens our eyes to a very different way of understanding what it even means to be wealthy.

Jesus of course doesn't jump right in to this guy's little family drama. No instead, he tells the man a story- a really odd story about a rich farmer with a bumper crop. It's probably one of the most straightforward parables- although it probably has the toughest ending of any of them.

It starts out with this rich farmer who has had a great year. In fact he's got so much stuff, he doesn't even know where he's going to put it all- he figures he's going to have to tear down the barns he has and build even bigger ones. Ecstatic with this, the farmer then makes his big mistake. He says to his soul- "Soul, look at all the STUFF I have. Just look at it. It's enough that I can just stop, I can just retire. I can just hang out, eat, drink and be merry." I. I. I. Never a word about anyone else mind you- never a word about the community in which he's living- only him and what he needs.

And of course this is when the shoe drops. God comes in, and calls the man a fool. He calls the man a fool because of the way he understands wealth- as if it's all about what he has and what he's stored up for himself. God tells the man what a fool he is because he put all this time and attention into his stuff, his things, and so little on anyone else- and this night his very life is being asked of him and what good are all those big barns going to do him now. In spite of all this STUFF, this man dies just like everyone else- and he doesn't die wealthy in God's eyes, but a fool. And then Jesus' punch line- and it's a doozy. He says it's the same with all of us who store up treasure for ourselves, but are not rich towards, or to God.

And here I think the New Jerusalem Bible offers us the best translation, which reads, “So it is when people store up treasures for themselves and are not rich in the sight of God.” Rich in the sight of God- what a phrase. And wealth in God’s sight isn’t about how much stuff we have individually, for the rich fool certainly had quite enough stuff, but much more about whether all this stuff draws him closer to community, to others or farther away.

It all goes back to that nasty little hut in Kenya, with Beinhocker and that Maasai elder. You and I- when it comes to thinking about wealth, I think we are so much like that Maasai elder. We may not define wealth in terms of how many cows a person has, no, we imagine we’re a bit more sophisticated than that- we look at the size of a person’s house, the kind of car a person drives, or whether they have the latest ‘igadget’ or what not. We may not think in terms of cattle, but we do think in terms of how much stuff *we* individually have at the end of the day. But here we’re being asked to open our minds and to at least try to think of another way, a communal way, to define wealth.

Fortunately, I think it’s not as hard as we think. As hardwired as we seem to be to think of wealth in individual terms, there is a part of us that realizes, even if we’re not always aware of it, that we include others into our calculations. Last week, the Economist ran a fascinating story about how we make choices about wealth. They studied hundreds of people playing a two person game that goes like this. Two people sit with a pot of money in between them. One person divides the pot. And the other person decides whether the two get to have the money or whether it stays on the table. So one

person divides the pot- and they can divide it however they like: 90/10, 80/20, or 50/50. But the other person gets to decide whether the two of them get the money or it stays on the table. Now, if you play the game more than once, economists have always known it is rational to turn down early bad offers to let the person you're playing with know you want them to be more fair. But, if you only play the game once an economist will say it's rational to accept any offer no matter how low, simply because some money is better than no money. But, even when the subjects only played the game once, time and again people turned down low offers preferring no money but having something better: equality and self respect. Economists may call this irrational- but psychologists popped in and pointed out that wealth is more than just how much you or I have individually- we also think in terms of how much we have as a community, together. Equality and self-respect have value, too, sometimes more than money or cows.

And Jesus invites us to stretch this even further. See, Jesus never says the farmer is wrong for having such a bumper crop. The fatal mistake of the farmer is not that he had a great crop. No, this is fantastic. The fatal mistake, the sad mistake, of the farmer is that he only addressed his own soul that night. He only thought about how to save all this stuff for himself. The problem was he really didn't have a clue what it means to be wealthy. For in God's sight a man, a woman isn't wealthy when they have enough stuff so they can kick back and not be dependant on anyone else, a man or a woman is wealthy when they are part of a whole community who has enough and shares what they have not with a sense of loss- but with joy.

A woman named Oseola McCarty knew this. Maybe more than anyone else in the world, Oseola McCarty knew this. The daughter of freed slaves, Oseola was born in Mississippi in 1908, same year my grandfather was born. Blessed with an enormous work ethic Oseola washed clothes for over 75 years- her only regret was she never got to go to college. See, she left school when she was just a child. When she was in the 6th grade she took her aunt into the hospital, and when they let her out, there was no one but Oseola around to take care of her. So she started washing clothes and never looked back. But she didn't let not going to school get in the way of learning. She remembers when she started out washing clothes, she only charged 1.50 a bundle. Then, over the years when inflation pushed up the price to 10 dollars a bundle, she remembers that seemed like a lot of money to her and she started putting some of it away. And so, day after day, little by little, she started saving. She said her rule was whatever she put in savings- she would never take out for herself. And she never broke that rule. She lived simply- never owned a car. Lived in the same house her whole life. And she took care of her family.

But somehow, somehow this didn't harden her or make her bitter. Somehow Oseola McCarty kept alive a sense, a vision of what true wealth was. Near the end of her life, when it would have made so much sense to take all the money she had saved and just focus on her and make her own life as comfortable as possible, she decided to give everything she had away in 1995- most of it, $150,000 dollars of it, going to the University of Mississippi in a special fund to help students from families like hers. An uneducated wash woman who gave $150,000 dollars- and not after she died, but long before she died. Why? Because wealth to her wasn't about what she had, but how she could help. After she gave the most amazing gift Ole Miss ever received she said simply:

“I just want the scholarship to go to some child who needs it, to whoever is not able to help their children. I'm too old now to get an education, but they can….I can't do everything, but I can do something to help somebody. And what I can do I will do. I wish I could do more."

Cancer took Oseola four years later after she made this incredible gift, but it was four years that she got to see young people go to school who otherwise would never have gone. Four years of making dreams happen. Four years of knowing her life had a purpose. Now, I don’t know how many cows she could have bought with all that money, I don’t know how many igadgets, but I know when she looked into the eyes of those young people, Oseola knew she was the wealthiest woman in the world, maybe not in our sight, but in God’s sight.

This morning as we come to the table, may we remember we remember how wealthy we are- not because of what we have stored up for ourselves somewhere or how good we have it individually, but because of the richness of the great communion of saints who has walked on before us, abides with us still, and wells up within us in spirit until the end of the age. **Amen.**