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We're really getting our share of Job this year. Besides reading the book of Job for Bible study, those of us who say the Daily Office have read Job again, and we're reading selections of Job in the Lectionary.

As we encountered Job last week, God and Satan agreed that Satan could afflict Job with all kinds of catastrophes, loss of his wealth, his children, and his health. God was certain that Job would remain faithful, even with all these losses. Job's friends are just as certain that Job must have done something to offend God to bring on these calamities. They, like many others in their time and ours, believe in a world in which God blesses us by showering us with good things in return for our doing good and being faithful to God.

So at this point Job is defending himself. He's proposing that he would be able to put God on trial and show that Job has in fact been faithful and good and trusting in God. He's not sure how to put God on trial. He can't find God to put him in the witness chair. Job's speech here reminds us that

he believes in this transactional, mechanistic view of the world in which God returns wealth and health and money to his people who are faithful to God and and do good work.

That is likely also the view of the rich young ruler in our Gospel. The Gospel of Mark only describes him as rich. In other gospels we hear him described as young and as a ruler.

Because he is rich, his world view seems to be that God has blessed him because he obeys the law. And so he asks Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus recites the law and the young man says he has obeyed it all his life.

But let's go back to the original question. The young man asks about inheriting eternal life, not earning it. Or, why is he even asking the question? Is it that, even with all his wealth, the one thing he cannot buy is eternal life? He probably has a good life now. As a person of substance he receives the honor of his peers; he is invited to all the best parties and celebrations and expects to sit with other leaders. His wealth also gave him

the resources and time to perform his religious duties, further earning him God's blessings.

Maybe he was familiar with the story of Job - reminding him that all of these good things could be gone in a moment. But I don't think that's it. He's very attached to his possessions. He asks because he knows that he is missing something in his life - he can buy anything he wants, but still lacks something he can't buy.

When Jesus tells him he must sell his goods and give the money to the poor, he is really disappointed - he grieves, we are told. Jesus acknowledges to his disciples that for humans that is impossible -- but Jesus is reminding us that the things we have -- if we love them too much -- can get between us and God.

These readings, from Job and Mark, place us in square opposition to the transactional view of faith, that if we live a good life and follow the rules, God will reward us in this life. Instead, Jesus looked at the rich man and loved him. Then he tells him, sell your goods, give it all away, then come and follow me. All of those commands tell the young man to pay attention

to others, not himself. He can use his wealth in many ways -- Jesus does not condemn him just for being rich but also for not using what he has for the benefit of others.

Bill Gates is now known for his wealth and his philanthropy. But it wasn't always so. By the time he was in his forties, he had accumulated in excess of 50 billion dollars, and had given away almost nothing. The story goes that his father, Bill Gates Senior, also wealthy, had a heart-to-heart talk with Bill Junior, that he needed to use his vast wealth to make a better world, that at some point additional money in one's investments and bank accounts has no utility.

Bill Gates Senior sounds a little like Jesus here -- give it away. That talk with his father and later talks with Warren Buffet and other billionaires changed Bill Gates' thinking and he joined a covenant to give away half of his money to charitable purposes. Gates says he was inspired by the example of the Rockefeller family.

We can legitimately criticize some of the Gates Foundation work -- making billions of dollars from software does not make one an expert in Education or health, for example. But we can only praise Gates' willingness to come to terms with his obligation to use what he has for the benefit of others.

It doesn't seem that the rich young man in Mark came to terms with what Jesus asked him to do. He walked away.

And this is the danger of wealth -- the young man thought he had done everything and that he could inherit eternal life. His wealth allowed him to feel self-sufficient, protective of his wealth, and isolated. Dependence on money can lead to narcissism and a lack of empathy. -- that he had no need for others, no obligation to his community, no need to follow Jesus.

Even for those of us who are not wealthy, we have a need to share our time and our energy with our community. A couple of weeks ago, when one member of our community was hospitalized and asked for help with his yard, several members responded immediately and were on the spot within an hour. At the same time, we need volunteers to occasionally take a meal

to someone who is sick or recovering, or to offer other kinds of help. Even if we don't know the person, they're part of our community. When one of our members dies, it often occurs that they haven't been to church for a while as they were homebound. I encourage you to come to their funeral or memorial service anyway, and maybe bring some cookies or other snack food for a reception afterward. It's a measure of our hospitality for the family of the deceased person and love for our community that we support and honor all of those in the St John's community, even those we haven't seen or don't know well.

What I hear from this gospel is that if we do not put our possessions, money, talents, and time into the service of our communities and our neighbors and God, that our possessions can become a roadblock. Sharing what we have is taking some risks -- that we won't have enough for ourselves and that we no longer feel in control. When you share resources with others, you are giving up control over them. But in fact, as Job shows us, even when we have wealth and family, we're not in control. Life can change quickly, for reasons we do not understand, however much we argue with God.

As we read Mark, we keep hearing that the Reign of God, or the Kingdom of God, is like no kingdom that we might know. Earthly, human powers protect wealth and the wealthy. They reward loyalty to the powerful, while they silence those who defend the poor and powerless. The reign of God promises love and community, depending on relationships, not wealth and power. That's not what the young rich man was looking for but I hope it is what we seek.

Amen

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