

## "True Riches"

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Each week we gather to hear and ponder stories from the Bible. In the New Testament, there are four accounts of Jesus' life, and one Book of Acts which tells the story of his disciples after Jesus left. But before the late 4th century, there were lots of gospels and accounts of the lives of the apostles. Most didn't make the cut. But they can still contain spiritual wisdom. This morning I would like to share one such story from the Acts of Thomas. It provides a window into the way Christians thought about wealth that can help us understand the deeper meanings of today's scripture reading.

After Jesus died, the apostles scattered across the world to spread the good news about Christ's life, death and resurrection. Thomas went to India. Some say he was Jesus' twin brother, which is confusing on all sorts of levels, but let's not get bogged down in that. Thomas, like Jesus, was a carpenter. When he arrived in India, he travelled with a merchant. They met a king who was very wealthy. When the king heard that Thomas was a carpenter, he asked him what kinds of things he could build. Thomas listed obvious things made of wood, but he also stated that he could build palaces. This caught the King's interest. He wanted a new palace built. Thomas, this strange Jewish foreigner, said he could do it.

The king takes Thomas to the site where the palace should be built. The king is impressed with Thomas' proposed design. He asks Thomas how long it will take to build, and how much it will cost. Thomas says he can have it built next year, but he will need gold and silver to pay for the workers and materials. The king agrees, and soon after, he sends Thomas the money so he can get started.

But instead of digging the foundations or hiring workers, Thomas takes the money and goes into the nearby villages. He seeks out the poor of each village, and gives them the king's money. He does this for months. He also heals people and works miracles in Jesus' name. After a few months have gone by he runs out of money to give away. The king sends a message asking how the building is going. Thomas replies through a messenger that the palace is almost finished, but he needs more money to build the roof. The king sends gold to finish the roof. Thomas goes into more villages and gives away more of the king's money to the poor.

Finally, the king receives word that he has been conned. There is no palace. Instead, this man from Palestine has been giving away all his money to the poor. The king is furious, so he sends for Thomas. He demands to know why Thomas hasn't built a palace for him. Thomas replies very calmly that he has built it, and the king will see it when he dies. The palace, he explains, is built in heaven, created out of all the good the king has done by giving money to the poor.

Not surprisingly, the king doesn't believe a word of this. He sends Thomas into a dungeon and decides to kill him the next day. But that night, the king's brother dies, and goes to heaven. An angel tells him he can choose which of the many mansions he may live in. The brother points to one spectacular palace and says he would like to live in its lower chambers. The angel says that one is not available, it belongs to the king. The brother realizes the great good Thomas has done for the king. He begs to be allowed to go back to earth and tell the king not to kill Thomas. The angel agrees, and just before the brother is placed in his burial robe, he comes back to life. He asks the king to grant him one wish- to buy the palace Thomas has built for the king in heaven. The king refuses. But, he tells his brother he may build one of his own with Thomas' help. Thomas is released from prison, and the king realizes that his wealth is better spent on the poor than on himself.

This story was likely written in the third century, so two hundred years after Jesus. It is a wonderful tale, and it reflects how Christians understood wealth. They saw physical wealth as a dangerous distraction. People who put their faith in wealth were effectively robbing the poor. Wealth was for people, not for egos. God is far more impressed by someone who only takes what they need and shares the rest. And Christians practiced this. It was customary for a church service to begin with people bringing food to the altar table - chickens, vegetables, fruit, bread. What wasn't used during the service would be distributed to the poor. The Lord's table was both a potluck and a food bank, all in one.

Today's parable from the Gospel of Luke contains these notions, but it is so short, it is easy to miss them.

Jesus tells us that once there was a man who owned farmland. One year he has a bumper crop, more than he can fit into his barns. So, he makes a plan. He will tear down his barns and build even bigger ones to store his crop. It is such a big crop that he can sell it slowly and live off the proceeds for years. He can rest, eat, drink and be merry. But on that very night, the angels of death takes him. God says, "you fool! Tonight your life is demanded of you. Who will get your possessions when you die?"

Like all parables, this one says a lot in a few words, and it is worth unpacking. First off, the text says that the ground of a certain rich man yielded a great harvest. There is no mention of the man having done anything special to create this bumper crop. He has not added a special kind of fertilizer or tried a new technique for plowing. The massive harvest just happens. It is so big, it won't fit in the farmer's barns, so he decides he should build some new ones. Wow, that is quite a harvest - how often do farmers not have enough room for their crops? Parables usually contain one impossible detail, and this is it. This man has received a massive, mind blowing harvest, too much to really happen. That's our hint that this story isn't really about crops, but about what God gives us, which is always more than we deserve.

Back to the farmer. Does he ever thank God for this incredible bounty? No. Does he say to himself, perhaps I should distribute some of the surplus to the poor? No. Instead, he says, I should tear down my existing barns and build even bigger ones. Then, I can rest, eat, drink and be merry.

Now, that phrase may sound familiar: "eat, drink and be merry." Anyone recognize it? We encountered it in one of our Bible studies this year. Right. It comes from the book of Ecclesiastes. This farmer is quoting from a book in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In Ecclesiastes, the writer is very pessimistic. He spends most of the book saying that nothing is worth doing because nothing lasts. All is vanity, all is vapour, it just vanishes. You get rich, you die, then your heirs squander everything you worked for. You get famous, get a good reputation, and someone comes along and tarnishes your name with lies. Nothing lasts, nothing is worth working for.

But, every once in a while in Ecclesiastes, the writer sees a glimmer of hope. He says that since nothing lasts, all any of us can really do is obey God, and God will give us the capacity to enjoy life and our work.

15 So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor all the days of his life which God gives him under the sun. ( Ecclesiastes 8:15)

The big point here is that this phrase, “eat, drink and be merry” is presented as a gift from God, so we can enjoy ourselves in a life where nothing ever lasts. It is very much an invitation to be mindful, to know that we can’t control much, but God gives us the capacity to enjoy life just the same as long as we follow God’s ways.

When the rich farmer in today’s parable says he wants to eat, drink and be merry, he says it while dreaming of keeping his bumper crop. He dreams of being in control of all this wealth, as if it will last. He has completely missed the point of Ecclesiastes when he quotes it. He imagines that he is a master of his own life. He deserved that big crop, and he deserves to keep it to himself so he can be rich and have a great life, with no thought of God or anyone else. He is not building a palace in heaven. Instead, he is building his heaven here on earth, imagining a life of partying and self gratification.

But that is not how life works. He doesn’t even get a chance to build those new barns. He dies the night he dreams up this plan. God gave him the bumper crop, and God took away his life. None of it was ever his, not his life nor his wealth.

It is easy to become trapped in prisons of our own design. When we fool ourselves into thinking that we can predict the future, then real life becomes very frustrating, since it rarely looks like what we imagined. Jesus suggests that we just relax. Set aside our dreams of bigger barns and fortunes. Those may happen, or they may not. Life is too complex to fully predict what will happen to us. Instead, we are invited to enjoy what we have, and share the rest with others, so they, too, may eat, drink and be merry.

The people who are the richest in this world don’t seem very happy. The billionaires in the news always seem to be complaining, always demanding new tax cuts and breaks from the government. They don’t seem able to enjoy life as it is. Perhaps that is the price of ambition. But it also suggests that there is an inverse relationship between dreaming of more and being able to appreciate what is right in front of you.

Jesus reminds us that the ravens don’t worry about tomorrow, and God feeds them - certainly God will do even more for us. The world doesn’t want us to realize that with the right attitude we can feel like we are all already rich. We have free sunshine, lakes full of water, air that fills our lungs each second. A simple stroll down the road can be a tour through an art gallery, where we see wonders everywhere, in the flowers, the clouds, the laughter of children, the kindness of strangers on the bus. Sharing what we have with others is an invitation to a life of simplicity. One where material possessions do not become our major concern. It allows us to feel connected to others. And it is how God treats each of us, by sharing God’s wealth.

We do not need to build palaces on Earth. But we do have the ability to make life better for others and ourselves during our time of living. And who knows? Perhaps we will find ourselves invited to live in a palace in heaven, one that we helped build. Amen.