

“Satisfied by Stuff?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
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[Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-31](#)

I wonder what was going through the heart and mind of the rich man of today's gospel lesson as he came to Jesus seeking to know what he must do to gain to inherit eternal life. The lesson tells us that he came *running* to Jesus, so perhaps he was feeling desperate and in need of salvation, or maybe he was just full of excitement at the possibility of learning about how he could grow as a person. Whatever motivated him to race toward Jesus that day, he came to Jesus as one who was already doing all the right things, having followed the commandments of God throughout his life. And we learn that he was not only devout but wealthy, having many need-meeting possessions. And yet, even then, though he had so much going for him, he knew that something was missing in his life and that Jesus could help him find it.

But then Jesus told the breathless, wealthy man something that he did not rush in to hear: In order to truly experience God's eternal, abundant life, he must give away his riches for the good of the poor. As the man was unwilling to give up his wealth, he went away, shocked and grieving. For it seems that he was possessed by his possessions, and that while, clearly, his soul was not satisfied by having a horde of stuff, he was too enslaved by clinging to his riches, that he was unwilling to let his wealth go to gain something better, even the one thing he ultimately sought, everlasting life. Surely, his stuff, and his drive to gain more stuff, not give it away, owned him.

I also wonder what was going through Jesus' disciples' minds as they watched the rich man who had run to them as he sadly sulked and slowly slinked away. Perhaps they thought about their own lives, and their own possessions, and wondered what more they would be asked to give up. Peter, the leader of the bunch and always quick to speak for them, told Jesus that *they* had already given up everything to follow him, which for some of the disciples may have included material wealth, as was likely the case at least for Peter, owner of the Simon Son of John Fishing Company, and Matthew the tax collector. And, for once in the gospel of Mark, the disciples demonstrate that they indeed got it right, leaving

behind their good things for the better thing -- the best thing -- of following Jesus the Christ as he led them to understanding how to find life that was abundant, everlasting, and truly satisfying. So the disciples, who were so often stumbling and stumbling and in need of redirection, must have been comforted when Jesus told them that, unlike the rich man who was possessed by his possessions, in giving what they had to follow Jesus and do the work he would have them do, they were treading on the right path.

This is a good -- and difficult -- lesson for us today, for we are all in need of more of God's abundant, everlasting, and satisfying life in our hearts, and we need constant reminders that the way to finding this treasure is by giving what we have for the good of others, not taking from others to enrich ourselves. It is a lesson that, unfortunately, too many of us who go by the name Christian don't follow closely enough. Too often, we have done and continue to do the opposite, taking from others, leading them and us to sadness and sorrow.

A clear example of this that we are remembering this weekend, that has had world-altering consequences, was the exploration and conquest of the Caribbean Islands and Americas by Europeans, beginning with Christopher Columbus, the Italian mariner who sailed for Spain to discover a way to access and extract the riches of Asia so as to fund European crusaders to go and make war in the Holy Land. While he did not find a new way to Asia, though he always thought he had, he did find communities of people and land and gold that he claimed belonged to Spain, following rules issued by various popes. Columbus, and the many conquistadores who would follow him, claimed -- in the name of Christ -- much land, many people, and, of course, huge amounts of silver and gold.

One of the conquerors who followed Columbus, Hernán Cortés, in order to extract gold from the inhabitants of what is today Mexico told them, "I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart which can be cured only with gold." While he was right about the disease, he was very wrong about the cure. For no matter the amount of gold the various indigenous peoples gave the Europeans, it was never enough to cure their disease of greed and their love of possessions, and everywhere the possession-obsessed Europeans went, they plundered and ruined land and entire civilizations of people.

The sickness of the heart of the rich man Jesus encountered was the same sickness of the European colonizers and it is the same sickness common to those of us who live in this society which came from colonization and conquest. Though much has changed over the centuries since the days of European colonization, one thing that has not changed is that we still love our stuff, and we are still too eager to keep and grow our comforting possessions, even when this causes harm to people or the planet we share.

But we are called to a better way of being, a way that leads to true healing for greed-diseased hearts. We are called to this way by being like the first disciples in giving all that we have and are to follow Christ and further his work in the world. We are called to use our possessions to bless the poor and less powerful rather than enriching ourselves at their expense. We are called to consider the harm done by previous generations, and instead of valorizing villains, we can choose to follow the many examples of good, selfless people who have used their energies and other resources to create a more just world in which people more equally experience the abundant life God desires for us all to enjoy. Surely we can be satisfied by stuff when we freely share it. Amen.