



JESUS AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Leah Carol Lewis, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Ph.D. Student, Emory University, Atlanta, GA

Lection - St. Luke 18:18-27 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 18) A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 19) Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” (v. 20) You know the commandments: “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.” (v. 21) He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” (v. 22) When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (v. 23) But when he heard this, he became sad; for he

was very rich. (v. 24) Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! (v. 25) Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (v. 26) Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” (v. 27) He replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

On the third Sunday after Easter the examination of Jesus’ teachings in Luke’s Gospel continues (previous Lucan texts were explored at lectionary calendar moments 12-16) with reflection on Jesus’ discussion of money and what it takes to have treasure in heaven. In this often told story, a male Palestinian ruler comes to Jesus with an important question and leaves sad although he is a follower of the Mosaic Law and wealthy. We are familiar (with the verses in Amos 5:11-12; 21-24, where God clearly tells those who are the object of divine anger that they, “Trample on the poor, take bribes and push aside the needy.” Then God calls for justice to burst forth as an ever-flowing stream. While sections of Amos 5 provide us obvious texts for a discussion of economic justice, the story of a rich ruler in Luke who appears to have the world at his beck and call and no obvious problem, also sheds light on how our behavior leads to economic injustice.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: St. Luke 18:18-27

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

“You may be broke, but you could never be poor.” These words pronounced by my deceased mother, Thelma L.K. Lewis, a 1951 graduate of North Carolina A&T University with a degree in biology, have come to mind frequently in the last five years as I have progressed through graduate studies. I am living my mother’s edict as a full-time graduate student who chose to answer God’s call to enter ministry. In some respects, I know first-hand the dilemma of the rich ruler. I grew up in a family whose paternal branch, prior to my birth, had experienced successful entrepreneurial enterprises for at least two generations. On my mother’s side, six of her seven sibling earned college degrees. These feats are remarkable for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of slaves. Standing on the shoulders of my ancestors I achieved a Juris Doctor degree from Howard University, and went on to work for seven years in international banking and finance in New York City. After years of financial prosperity the Lord prevailed upon me to leave a six-figure income to serve in his vineyard. I did not have to give up all that I owned, but I did have to give up a precious holding, economic comfort, which I had always known.

Historically, due to our legacy of slavery many African Americans, and contemporarily, more and more Americans of all hues, know the realities of being reared in households that are poor by all financial measures. The challenge if you are reared in poverty is too come out alive and not too scarred. To overcome, with memory in tact, allows one to gain a perspective on economic justice that can serve the wider community. African Americans like me, who cannot claim a legitimate long-term status as impoverished, must stand in solidarity with our sisters, brothers,

and children who know the harsh realities of being oppressed, economically and otherwise. We all must cultivate the strength and sensitivity to acknowledge that economic injustice is something that is bred primarily by systems, not by persons who do not, or even those who will not, work.

Maintaining memory of the experience of poverty or understanding the plight of the poor is crucial, for if we are not careful, we risk failing to be accountable to the poor. A selective memory or inattentiveness may prompt us to divide the world into “those people,” those who have not gotten ahead, and those who have. We may even start to accept that there has to be a permanent, impenetrable, unchanging underclass.

I must confess that as I spend more and more time in the ivory towers of education I do encounter, from time-to-time, scholars and administrators who advocate the “pull yourselves up by your bootstraps” philosophy, rather than make the effort to address embedded systems and structures that make economic injustice an inevitable occurrence in this nation and around the globe. One conversation illustrates my point. A middle-class colleague of mine was bemoaning the fact that so many poor African Americans were not taking advantage of opportunities that were more prevalent than ever before which in theory could lead them out of poverty. Both of us named, *ad nauseam*, all of the things that our people were doing to continue in poverty. Then, my classmate made a statement which prompted my dissent. He said, “Black people need to quit blaming other folk for poverty because they (other people) are not going to stop doing what they have always done.” At that point, I asked, “What do you believe it is that they have always done?” He plunged into a long list of systemic barriers that maintain poverty. At the end of his list, I asked, “Can most people be expected to overcome all of that?” At that moment we were both convinced to reframe our conversation to include personal responsibility by those who aid in creating and maintaining poverty. To blame the poor is to overlook the foundational causes of economic injustice – the human-made systems of oppression – systems by which this world currently functions.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

A. The Old Rich Ruler

The story of the rich ruler (also called a magistrate in many translations) in Luke is part of the Triple Tradition, meaning that it is also found in Matthew (19:16-22) and Mark (10:17-22). The Lucan version of this text for this lection commentary was selected for two reasons. First, Luke, perhaps more than any writer in the New Testament, discusses the “Christian disciple’s use of material possession, wealth, and money.”¹ Luke seems particularly concerned that those who claim discipleship with Christ understand what conduct toward finances comports with this claim. It is Luke who claims: You cannot love God and *mammon* (money) (16:13b). Perhaps his heightened concern explains why he, unlike Matthew and Mark, uses the word **all** to identify how many of his possessions the rich ruler is to sell with the proceeds being given to the poor.

As Luke's version of this story unfolds Jesus is queried by the rich ruler concerning how one inherits eternal life. Before answering this query, having been called Good Teacher by the rich ruler, Jesus corrects him concerning who is good. Jesus says it is God alone. Then, Jesus as would any teacher of his day, says follow the Mosaic Decalogue and names five of the laws. You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother. These are areas of the Decalogue that address how to treat others. To this the ruler/magistrate basically responds, No problem. You are right Jesus. I know the Law and I have followed the Law all of my life. So, if that is it, Jesus, no problem.

Unfortunately for the rich magistrate, it's not going to be that easy. Jesus says: "There is still one thing lacking." Although Luke actually states two things (sell and follow), Jesus says one thing is lacking because what the man needs to do is just one thing—decide that he wants to follow Jesus in every way. That is the one thing and it is the main thing that stands in the way of the rich ruler being a true disciple and receiving heavenly treasures. Who would hesitate to follow Jesus and obtain heavenly treasures? The rich! So, when Jesus says to him: "Sell **all** you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow me." Luke says that the magistrate becomes sad because he is rich. He does not dispute what Jesus says. He does not inquire as to whether there is a loop-hole in what Jesus requires, or some special dispensation like a get eternal life and heavenly treasures card just for the rich. He knows he does not want to do as Jesus instructs, so he is just sad, very, very sad. Then Jesus, with no attempt to make matters better, rhetorically says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Lest the crowd had any doubt about the answer or hope for wiggle room, Jesus answers his own question, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

B. The New Rich Ruler?

When this text is preached, the rich ruler is typically judged quite harshly. I wonder, however, if we would judge him with so much consternation if we held up mirrors to our materialism and were honest about the reflections. When American corporations pay workers minimum wage with few, if any, benefits, or build factories in developing nations where labor is outrageously cheap, which makes us the recipients of material goods such as bigger TVs and cheaper clothes, do we stand in the place of the rich ruler? When conglomerates destroy neighborhoods by dumping toxic waste in those communities because this is cheaper than taking the steps to neutralize the toxic waste, and we support these entities by purchasing their products, do we stand in the stead of the rich ruler? When politicians devise tax law after tax law to aid corporations in paying fewer taxes while raising taxes on those who are living pay check to pay check, and we do nothing, do we align ourselves with the rich rulers of this world? When we build large houses of worship but fail to feed the poor or advocate against economic policies that further silence the voiceless, or preach a word that promotes conspicuous consumption as a Christian entitlement versus a gospel of love, service and liberation, are we the rich ruler? When we buy items we do not need to satisfy materialistic urges that would align us with the big-spenders but never with the Savior, do we not become the rich ruler!

I read a sermon about this rich ruler titled “Can Rich People Be Saved?” The writer stated “We quickly compare ourselves to Oprah Winfrey and Bill Gates and declare that we are not rich. What we **do not do** is compare ourselves to the rest of the world. Americans constitute 5% of the world’s population but consume 24% of the world’s energy. On average, one American consumes as much energy as 2 Japanese, 6 Mexicans, 13 Chinese, 31 Indians, 128 Bangladeshis, 307 Tanzanians and 370 Ethiopians. Americans eat 815 billion calories of food each day. That’s roughly 200 billion more than needed—enough to feed 80 million people around the world. Americans throw out 200,000 tons of edible food every day.... There are more shopping malls than high schools in America.”²

Many years ago in my spiritual immaturity, I read this text and asked, why didn’t Jesus allow the man to keep some of his possessions? Come on, all of your possessions to the poor? Then, finally it dawned on me that Jesus said all because we need to be willing to relinquish all to release the stranglehold that money can have over us, particularly, in consumer-driven societies. If money does not control us we are free to take a critical look at what is done with, and for, money to the detriment of all of humanity, including the rich and powerful few, who according to the text ultimately suffer, spiritually and eternally, unless they take corrective action. We, God’s human creation, can become prophetic financial citizens only if we are not consumed by the same gluttony that we ought to rail against.

Celebration

There is good news in this text. At the beginning of this commentary I indicated that I chose the Lucan version of this story for two reasons, and the first is given above. The second reason that the Lucan version of the story of the rich magistrate was selected is because it is only in Luke that the magistrate does not go away. He is sad, but Luke does not indicate that he went away. So Jesus, I presume with the man still standing there, after someone says, and I paraphrase, “Well my goodness Jesus, then who can be saved? Jesus gives the good news. “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” Jesus makes plain that the ruler has a chance, and that we also have a chance to make discipleship matter more than money. We can be the instruments that are used to bring forth economic justice for the truly poor. These are persons who are redlined, sidelined, and kept at the back of the line, if they are permitted in the line at all. We can be the voices, hands, feet, and wallets of the economic justice we, like Jesus, want to see in the world.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: The attire of the wealthy ruler; the sad look of the wealthy ruler; the faces of the distressed crowd; a camel attempting to go through the eye of a needle; and

Sounds: The sound of the voice of the ruler and the questioners from the crowd.

Notes

1. Albright, William, and David Freedman, eds. The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to Luke I-IX. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1979. pp. 247-251.
2. Thomas, Frank A. "Can Rich People Be Saved." The African American Pulpit. (Fall 2007); pp. 47-49.
3. Hahnel, Robin. Economic Justice and Democracy: From Competition to Cooperation. Paths for the 21st century. New York, NY: Routledge, 2005. (Further recommended reading on economic justice.)