God has sent the rich away empty

Mary H. Schertz

For all Jesus's emphasis on wealth and possessions, especially in Luke but in the other Gospels as well, the topic gets short shrift in the contemporary church. Money—how we use it and how we feel about it—may be the only issue of discussion more sensitive, and more fraught, than sexuality.

Still, if one reads the Gospel of Luke, particularly if one reads it through as a whole, the way one reads a biography or novel, it's hard to escape the centrality this issue has in the good news of the gospel. The song Mary sings, as she is putting together what has happened to her personally with what this strange pregnancy means for her people, is a case in point. She rejoices that God's act in her life includes bringing down the mighty and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:52–53). Luke alters Matthew's beatitude about the poor in spirit in significant ways. He omits "in spirit," and he adds a correlative woe: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your comfort already" (6:24).[1] These differences make it difficult to argue that Luke is using poverty and wealth as spiritual metaphors. Rather, in Luke's Gospel Jesus is talking about real-life poverty and real-life wealth.

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Jesus's teaching about poverty and wealth continues in the travel narrative in Luke (chapters 9–19). Again, Luke alone of the evangelists includes harsh cautionary tales about the use and misuse of wealth. In Luke, Jesus tells the story of the rich farmer who planned to tear down his small barns, build bigger ones, and relax in his great wealth (12:13–21)—only to die that very night. Jesus tells the story about the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31). Here he describes a rich man and Lazarus, a very poor one. Both

have died: Lazarus is resting at the side of Abraham while the rich man is in torment. The problem here, as Jesus points out, is that in life Lazarus begged in vain for crumbs from the rich man's table.

With stories and sayings like these, we might conclude, as the disciples did at one point, that rich people cannot belong to the kingdom of God. They, and others around Jesus, bring up the issue after an encounter with a rich ruler who wanted to inherit eternal life. In that context, Jesus observes that it is harder for a rich man or woman to enter the kingdom than for a camel to be threaded through a needle. Jesus's audience is exasperated. Well, who can be saved? (18:24–25).

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We, like those early followers, might well also conclude that the only way to live a faithful life in the favor of God is to renounce all earthly possessions and join the company of the voluntarily poor. We have marvelous examples of people who have done just that. Monastics and new monastics, Anabaptist intentional communities, notable individuals such as Millard Fillmore and Mother Teresa—are all inspiring instances. Doing likewise is clearly a profoundly formational way to follow Jesus. Making a choice of voluntary poverty is a delight to God and a blessing for the church.

But the vision of Jesus (as Luke portrays him) for how we are to relate to money and possessions in our lives is broader than voluntary poverty. Jesus's vision includes all of us, whatever our calling. Living Christianly *always* involves our money, our possessions, and how we use them. This is true whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. This is true whatever our options and obligations are. This is true no matter who we are or what we do.

Two quest stories

Luke has interspersed seven quest stories in his Gospel.[2] In these stories a person approaches Jesus with a quest for something of vital importance for human life and well-being. There are obstacles to the fulfillment of this quest—sometimes offered by the circumstances surrounding the quest, sometimes internal to the quester, and on one occasion imposed by Jesus himself. In the

course of the story these obstacles are overcome—or not—and the quest is fulfilled—or not. Three of these stories occur toward the beginning of the Gospel in the Galilean ministry section. They include the stories of the paralytic (5:17–26), the centurion and his ill slave (7:1–10), and the anointing woman (7:36–50). Three of them occur toward the end of the journey narrative as Jesus is nearing Jerusalem. They include the stories of the ten lepers (17:11–19), the rich ruler (18:18–30), and Zacchaeus (19:1–10). The last, and most poignant, is the story of the repentant thief on the cross (23:39–43), who with Jesus forms the last community of healing and hope in Jesus's earthly ministry.

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The ruler and eternal life (18:18–30). In the story of the rich ruler, the matter of vital human importance is the quest for eternal life. Jesus presents the obstacle. He cites the law, or part of it. The Greek word for "eternal" can also connote "abundant." Jesus notes that what this ruler really wants is not so much to live forever but to have a meaningful, abundant life—something to which every human can relate. Jesus's very Jewish assumption here is that the correct following of the law is what leads to an abundant life. He speaks of five of the ten commandments. They roughly follow the order given in Deuteronomy 5:16–20.

But the ruler is not convinced. He contends that since he was young he has observed all the laws that Jesus is quoting to him. Still he lacks satisfaction. Something more is needed to fill his yearning heart.

Here at last we get to the heart of the matter, and it is yet another obstacle. For Jesus, discipleship involves keeping the law within a framework of caring for the poor and following him. In 12:33, the disciples are enjoined to sell their possessions and give alms. Here the ruler who has fulfilled the law from his youth is told that the one thing he still lacks is the distribution of his possessions to the poor. What completes a life lived within Israel's

covenant is a concern for the poor, who have the ear of Israel's God. Treasure in heaven follows that act of discipleship.

But the ruler is unable to bridge the span. When he hears Jesus's words, he becomes sad, for, as the text tells us, "he was very rich." His response—or rather, his lack of response—leads to Jesus's observation about how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Wealth once again proves to be a formidable barrier between the one who wishes to have eternal life and the entrance to abundant life in the kingdom. As we have already noted, Jesus likens wealth to a camel and access to the kingdom to the eye of a needle.

Zacchaeus (19:1–10). The story of Zacchaeus is a companion piece to the story of the ruler in chapter 18. Zacchaeus is not just a tax collector but a head tax collector. In his standing in the community, in his wealth and power, he is similar to the ruler. Nevertheless, the outcome of this quest story is quite different. The differences become apparent in verse 2. Zacchaeus is seeking to see Jesus. He is not trying to justify himself by evaluating himself as a follower of the law; he is not seeking eternal life.

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His goal is different. He is simply trying to see Jesus. But he cannot, because he is too short to see over the crowds. So he runs ahead and climbs a tree in order to see better. What the story sets up here in a few terse words is a character who goes against type. While Zacchaeus may be the counterpart of the ruler in terms of his social location, in his looks and behavior he is more like a child. He becomes an example of exactly what Jesus has been saying about the kingdom being made up of those who receive it like children, his observing that with God not even getting a camel through the eye of a needle is impossible.

Zacchaeus, for all his small stature and tree-climbing ability, is fully an adult. The repentance he completes and the restitution and generosity he enacts are fully the decisions and actions of an adult. But his receptivity and enthusiasm, his charisma, are the qualities of discipleship that Jesus values in the children who come to him and the people who follow him, leaving family and

possessions, through Galilee and on the way toward Jerusalem.

Jesus tells Zacchaeus to come down from the tree because "it is necessary" that he, Jesus, stay in his—Zacchaeus's—house today. It is a short and prosaic sentence, but it resounds with other themes in Luke's Gospel. The appearance of the Greek *dei* ("it is necessary") is always significant in Luke's writing and points here, as elsewhere, to what is at the heart of God's purposes for Jesus. Staying at Zacchaeus's house is as much a part of the work of the incarnation as suffering, dying, and being raised are. Zacchaeus responds quickly and joyfully to the invitation to invite. Again, he exhibits those qualities of receptivity apparent in children, so difficult for jaded adults, and so essential to entering the kingdom. The childlike quality at work here is not innocence—Zacchaeus is hardly innocent—but readiness of heart and mind to embrace the topsy-turvy values of the kingdom.

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Others in Zacchaeus's community are much more typically "adult." They grumble about Jesus's propensity to eat with sinners. This response is typical of the resistance to his mission that Jesus has had to deal with all along. But Zacchaeus is not deaf to the grumbling, and furthermore, he accepts the judgment contained in their words. Here he proves himself to be fully and impressively adult. He stops and announces that he intends to give half his goods to the poor and to restore fourfold anything he has gained through fraud. It is an act with public as well as private ramifications. Depending on the extent of his fraud, which is not stated in the text, Zacchaeus may not have impoverished himself completely. But he has fulfilled the requirements of the kingdom and done so with great joy and grace.

Note the order of events in this text. There is no sharp division between the work of God in Jesus, and Zacchaeus's own movements and actions toward his salvation. Zacchaeus is seeking Jesus. Jesus reaches out to Zacchaeus. The setting is a setting of communion and hospitality, and from that setting flows personal transformation as Zacchaeus responds with generosity and justice. In the end, Jesus announces that these actions and interactions are

the work of salvation, a salvation that restores Zacchaeus not only to God but to his community as well. The penultimate declaration of Jesus is that Zacchaeus is "also a son of Abraham." In his repentance and restitution, Zacchaeus has become not only a follower of Jesus but also a restored son of Israel.

The very last statement of Jesus in this text is a statement of the purpose of the son of humanity: to seek and to save the lost. There is little doubt that Jesus is seeing in what has just happened with Zacchaeus something of a summation of his life work. Yes, this is why he is here on earth.

Then who can be saved?

Many Christians in North America can and likely should identify with the rich ruler and Zacchaeus. Although few of us would describe ourselves as wealthy, in a global sense it is likely that Jesus would include us among those for whom it is difficult to enter the kingdom of God. With the comforts of home ownership, cars, more clothes than we can wear out, more food and drink than we need, easy access to health care, and savings in the bank, comes the quiet and pointed observation of Jesus: One thing you lack. Go. Sell. Give. Come. Follow.

Into our comfort comes the quiet and pointed observation of Jesus: One thing you lack. Go. Sell. Give. Come. Follow. How do we meet Jesus seriously and in good faith, with his challenge before us?

How do we meet Jesus seriously and in good faith, with his challenge before us? How do we admit that, yes, we still yearn for that thing we lack, that abundant and eternal life? Why is this so hard?

With some hesitancy, I venture the notion that part of the problem with the way many of us and many of our churches (including congregational resource centers, publishing houses, and seminaries) have handled issues of money and possessions reflects a tendency to treat the topic ethically rather than spiritually. My hesitancy is twofold.

First, we have *spiritualized* these questions—to the detriment of the gospel, and to our own detriment. Spiritualization lets us off the hook. We think that as long as we are *willing* to give God everything we have, to sell what we have and give it to the poor and come and follow Jesus, we don't need to actually do that. Or

we think that as long as we understand that our true wealth is heavenly, we can do whatever we want with our earthly wealth. Such mental maneuverings do a disservice to the seriousness with which Jesus addresses issues of wealth and possessions. They also do a disservice to us.

My second hesitation is that sound ethical thinking is the best antidote to spiritualization. I do not wish to play down or minimize in any way the importance of good, hard ethical thinking. It is important work in behalf of the church. We need careful thinking about consumption of goods, global economic disparities, stewardship, and war taxes. We need to consider class differences, and how those distinctions contribute to poverty. We need to look closely at poverty and its impact on society. Furthermore, we need careful study of all these issues in light of the gospel message and in light of Jesus as Luke portrays him.

The son of humanity came to seek and to save the lost

But the gospel goes beyond even such careful ethical reasoning. Jesus's teaching on wealth and possessions aims right at the heart of the matter. The core problem with wealth and possessions is, in the gospel light, also the core possibility. The core problem is that acquisition of more than we need in order to supply basic human needs separates us from God and from our fellow human beings. The core possibility is that releasing what we have acquired beyond what we need brings us into unity with God and our fellow human beings. Like the disciples who released their boats to follow Jesus, we are never asked to release wealth and possessions as an end in itself. Neither holiness nor joy is fully lodged in the release. Holiness and joy are fully lodged in the "in order to." Release is part of that. It is the first step into freedom, a freedom for which we long, and for which we were made, whether or not we know it. Jesus covets that freedom for us. It is a freedom—holiness and joy—that brings us home at last, at home with God and at home with our fellow created beings.

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Whatever the range of wealth and possessions in a congregation, this message of release, freedom, joy, and holiness is one that we need to hear. Hearing Jesus on wealth and possessions certainly does not excuse us from the difficult work of discernment. What are basic human needs? What falls outside this category of need? What defines acquisition beyond need? What does release entail? How do business opportunities, businesspeople, investment, and investors fit into the picture? How do we care for institutions in light of need, release, freedom, and joy? What happens when our responsibilities involve the basic human needs of other people, sometimes many other people?

The teachings of Jesus are meant to speak into these discussions, not circumvent them. But the goal of these discussions in the light of Christ is not perfect answers. It is not perfect Christians, or perfect congregations, or a perfect world. The goal is light, free, joyous Christians and light, free, joyous communities of faith. The goal is Christians and communities of Christians who can tackle hard questions and come to hard conclusions with an uplifted heart, a lightness of being.

Notes

[1] Unless noted otherwise, translations are from the NET Bible (net.bible.org).
[2] Robert Tannehill, *The Gospel according to Luke*, vol. 1 of *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 111–29.

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