

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, August 25, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

## “WE’RE RICHER THAN WE THINK”

Luke 12:21

Yes, I have taken today’s title from the advertising slogan of a bank, which says “You’re Richer Than You Think.” But I have changed it to read, “We’re richer than we think.” And that’s because of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In Christ we are rich toward God.

In our spring garage sale, we have a silent auction in which people bid on goods that have been donated. This year a local lawyer donated his time and the necessary paperwork to make a will. He valued the package at \$325. The winning bid was just over \$100. That was good for the church and it was good for the person who won, since she can now make her will at a bargain price. Having a will usually makes things easier for your family after you’re gone, though it’s no guarantee. I know of a family in which mother died and left a clear will. But the family is in a dispute over the sale of her property. After three years and going through several lawyers and accountants, it’s still not settled.

That reminds me of a story I heard. A school teacher put a math problem to her class. “A wealthy man dies and leaves ten million dollars. One quarter is to go to his wife; one fifth to his son; one sixth to his butler, and the rest to charity. Now what does each get?” After a long silence and a lot of head scratching, Joey puts up his hand. “Yes, Joey, what does each get?” the teacher asked. And Joey answered, “I know. Each gets a lawyer.”

In Luke 12:13, a man said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Now the Jewish law was clear. The eldest son got 2/3rds of a father’s estate, and the younger son or sons received 1/3. That may seem unfair, but the eldest son had responsibility for looking after the whole family financially while the younger son could do what he wanted with his share. Recall the story of the prodigal son. We don’t know what the problem was in this case. Perhaps the eldest son was slow in dividing the estate. But Jesus refused to get dragged into the situation. To the whole crowd, he said, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Well, we know that don’t we, we who gather for worship on a beautiful summer Sunday. We may enjoy our possessions but they do not own us. In fact, some of us are in the process of downsizing and of giving up some possessions. We know that the meaning of life comes not through an abundance of possessions but through a relationship with the living God. That was the essence of so much of Jesus’ teaching.

Jesus told a parable about a rich man whose land produced so abundantly that he needed larger barns to store all his grain and his goods. He said to his soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool. This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus said, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Now this farmer was wealthy and successful, but gave no apparent thought to God or to other people. His whole conversation was focussed on "I and my." He was rich from an earthly perspective but from God's perspective he was poor indeed. And so God called him a fool.

We here today are not like this foolish farmer. We are wise. Through our relationship with Christ we have become rich toward God. Paul tells us that, "Christ Jesus, though he was rich, became poor so that through his poverty you might become rich." Paul is speaking about how Christ, through giving up everything for our sake, makes us rich as we put our faith in him. So we are richer than we think, because in Christ we are rich toward God.

*First, in Christ we are rich toward God because we live gratefully.*

The farmer gave no indication that he recognized God's hand in his abundance. He took it all for granted or perhaps chalked it up to his own skill and hard work. Well, we will grant those things, but he could not have been so successful on his own. He didn't provide the sunshine, or create the seed and the soil, or send the rain. There was no hint of gratitude in him.

How different was our Lord. Jesus lived gratefully. Before performing his miracle with five loaves and two fish, he held them up and thanked God for what a little boy had generously given him. He did it again on the night of the last supper, giving thanks to God as he broke the bread and poured out the cup, the symbols of our salvation. Jesus loved his Heavenly Father, he took delight in God's world, he recognized God as the giver of all good gifts, and he gave thanks. No one was richer toward God than Jesus.

In Christ we are rich toward God. We know that this is our Father's world. We enjoy the world he has given us, while at the same time treating it respectfully and gently. We recognize God as the source of life and love and all the gifts and opportunities life affords us. And we give God thanks.

I sometimes think of a story I read years ago. In the early years of the Salvation Army, workers often went from home to home in the poorer parts of London, seeking out desperate souls who needed help. One Salvation Army worker discovered a man who was known as Old Bob, all alone. There in his one room flat was a tin cup holding a bit of water. On the shelf was a hard loaf of bread. Old Bob was too weak to reach these things for himself. So the Salvation Army worker gently put the cup and the bread into his trembling, outstretched hands. And what happened next moved her to tears. Before eating and drinking, Old Bob bowed his head and gave thanks, "Dear Lord, for what we are about to receive we are truly thankful." Old Bob was poor in goods, but he was rich toward God. We can be sure that this man now knows the true riches of heaven.

We are rich toward God because we live gratefully. Thankful people are generous in our giving and generous in our praise. We align ourselves with the Psalmist who wrote, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever."

*Secondly, in Christ we are rich toward God because we live usefully.*

Now the farmer's skills were not wasted. That abundant grain he harvested would provide him with a nice retirement, for sure. But it would be sold to provide food for people and animals. It was part of the food chain we all depend on. His grain contributed to peoples' daily bread. Nothing wrong with a farmer who produces an abundant crop. Not at all. The trouble was he didn't see his abundance as part of anything larger than his own retirement plans. He didn't realize that he had been gifted in order to accomplish something for God's Kingdom and God's people. Remember Joseph in Egypt storing up grain during seven years of abundance in order to feed the whole known world through seven years of famine. Joseph saw that what happened to him had a bigger purpose. He said to his astonished brothers, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, to accomplish...the saving of many lives." Joseph was rich toward God.

We are all gifted. Some of us are abundantly gifted, and most of us are more modestly gifted. But in Christ we are rich toward God. So we see our gifts and achievements not just in terms of what they can do for us. We see them in terms of how they can further God's purposes on earth. We offer ourselves and our gifts for building God's Kingdom, supporting the church, and spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We use our gifts to help bring comfort and relief to others. We know that God blesses us in order that we may be a blessing.

Now as I approach retirement I must admit that I am rather attracted by the farmer's words, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink, be merry." I could say to myself, "Soul, you have an adequate pension laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink, be merry." But I realize that such an attitude would be wrong. God would call me a fool. Of course, I hope to enjoy God's world in retirement. I hope we have many good years. I also hope I will have opportunities to still offer my gifts for the church and for God's purposes. I'm not going to work full time, for sure, but it won't be all "relax, eat, drink, be merry." In fact, I would be miserable doing just that. And of course, Adelaide will want me out of the house sometimes. In Christ we know that our lives are meant for purposes larger than ourselves and our own comfort. We are rich toward God because we live usefully, offering our gifts for God's purposes in this world.

*Finally, in Christ we are rich toward God because we live faithfully.*

By that I mean that we are living by faith. We put our trust in God our Heavenly Father and in Christ his Son. We do not put our trust in earthly things which are uncertain and can be taken from us in a moment. One day for certain we will no longer have our earthly possessions. The things we have prepared will belong to someone else. The story is told of a very rich woman who died and someone asked, "How much did she leave?" Someone answered, "All of it." It was true for the farmer in the story. It's true no matter how much we have. We will leave it all behind one day. So we enjoy and use our earthly possessions for good while we can, but we don't give our hearts to them. That really is the point of Jesus' story, I think. Life can change in an instant. So

don't put your ultimate trust in things that are temporary. Put your trust in the God who is eternal, and in the saving Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

One day your life will be demanded of you. Mine, as well. We will stand before our Maker on the day of judgement. We will have to give an account of ourselves. On our own we will be found wanting. We may get a B+, pretty good, but an A+, 100% is required to avoid perishing and to gain heaven. And the only thing that will bring us safely through judgement is to trust in the One who got more than an A+, Jesus Christ the sinless One. In love Christ gave his life as the sacrifice for our sins and was raised from the dead by his Father to live forevermore. And now God says to us all, "Put your trust in my Son and I will transfer his grade to you. Trusting in him You are acceptable to me now and forever. In Christ you are a forgiven child of God, an heir of eternal life. You are righteous in my sight. And you will have nothing to fear on the day your life is demanded of you." And so we sing, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling."

You and I are rich toward God because we live faithfully. We trust in God and in his Son who is God's loving provision for our greatest need, salvation from the power of sin and death. Rich toward God is the person who says, "I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord." May God, by his Holy Spirit confirm this faith in you and in me this and every day. For with such faith we far are richer than we can imagine.