

Pentecost 19, Proper 21, Year C, 2013
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today
we've jumped
from the beginning of the second chapter
of the letter to Timothy
with its advice on prayer
right to the end of the letter, to chapter six.
On the way, we've skipped over instructions about appropriate church behavior for women -
including not overly adoring yourself -
qualifications for those in leadership,
and how to deal with troublemakers in the congregation.

And now he gets to the really difficult part.
Which is
money.
And particularly,
those who have it - people who are rich -
and those who want to have it.

And before you switch off,
because I suspect few, if any, of us here
feel rich,
some statistics.

Last year, the average income for households within a three mile radius of the church - that
includes Head of the Harbor and Nissequogue
as well as Nesconset and Lake Grove -
was estimated to be
just under one hundred thirty thousand dollars.
That puts you in the top fifteen percent of households in this country,
and the top 0.06 percent
of the people in the world.

Even if your income is only half that,
you're still well above average for our country,
and in the top 0.14 percent in the world.
You'd have to be earning less than \$31,000
to get out of the top one percent.

We may not feel rich,
at least in comparison with Bill Gates or Warren Buffet or Michael Bloomberg
but in comparison with many people in our own society
and most people in the world,
on any objective measure
we are rich.

We may struggle with our bills,
we may have to forego things
we would like to buy,
we may live more simply than we'd like,
but we are rich.
And if we're not,
most of us
would like to be!

And that means
that the words of this letter
apply to us.

And there are two parts
to our reading today.
The first
is for those who want to be rich.

“But those who want to be rich,” says the writer to Timothy,
“fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people
into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their
eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many
pains.”

We know the stories - or at least the stereotypes.
The eighteenth century gentleman
who plays cards at his club -
“Just one more hand”
and gambles away his inheritance.

The person who is desperate to keep up with their peers
and buys jewelry and designer clothing and a new car
on credit,
juggling from one card to the next
to keep ahead of the bill collector.

Or people like Bernie Madoff
who ran a huge Ponzi scheme
where the people up the top got rich
and the people down the bottom
lost everything.

It's easy to look at the stereotypes
and be very self righteous.
"I'd never do something like that,"
we say.

Except of course, we do.
"Do not covet" might be one of the ten commandments,
but we all know
what it is
to see something that belongs to someone else
and want it.

"Keeping up with the Joneses"
is the colloquial term for it,
and it has driven a dramatic rise in the standard of living
over the last 70 or so years.

I often hear people talk of their growing up years,
when their parents never bought anything on credit - even their homes -
now many of us buy almost everything that way, and while we'd like to think we pay it all off
each month,
it's so easy to spend just a little more than we can afford,
to take the option of the car lease with almost nothing up front
and a guaranteed new car every three years,
rather than drive something secondhand and a little battered.

And I suspect that it's not so much
that we want to be rich
as that we want the lifestyle of the rich -
the lifestyle that we see on TV,
though in reality it's never quite like that -
and so we make decisions in our lives
that will get us there.

When I went to college
we did what called to us,
what was our passion,

even if it was not something particularly well paying;
 I remember my peers talking about how it was possible that they might never own a home,
 because the area they felt called to work in
 just didn't pay enough to do anything more than rent.
 Where as now you see advertisements for colleges
 that focus on how much you will earn at the end.

It's one thing to be realistic;
 it's another to be driven by money.

And that's what we're being warned against here.
 About allowing ourselves
 to be driven by money.
 About allowing our desire for it
 and for the things that it buys,
 to be the most important thing
 in our lives.

And before you say
 that would never happen to me,
 think about what Jesus said.
 Not the line about not being able to serve God and money,
 though that's relevant too,
 but what he said about our priorities.
 "What is the most important commandment?"
 he was asked.
 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength
 and love your neighbor
 as yourself."
 was his answer.
 And the people listening,
 brought up on what we call the Old Testament,
 would have recognized those words
 as coming from the sixth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy,
 introduced by these words:
 "The Lord our God, the Lord is one,"
 and that, in turn, follow on from the Ten Commandments,
 which begin by demanding
 that nothing
 should come
 before God.

Hard words.

Because how often
does our desire for something material
get in the way
of our serving God?
Remember,
it's the love of money,
not money itself
that is the root of many kinds of evil.
Money is neutral -
it's how we approach it, what we do with it,
how it fits in our lives,
that makes all the difference.

You all may know
that we as a parish
run a pretty tight budget,
and sometimes
there is simply not enough to do
the work God is calling us to.
Our buildings have to be maintained;
we have to pay insurance;
our staff need to be able to live.
And once all that is paid - sometimes with some juggling, delaying bills because we just don't
have the cash on hand -
there's very little to spend on helping people grow in faith, or reaching out to those in need, or
covering the costs of worship.

Every year,
we ask you to pledge.
And many of our members are faithful,
and some are generous.

But all of us have to ask the hard questions,
“Am I being faithful to God with my money?”
“Does my spending reflect my commitment to Christ?”
“How does my spending in other parts of my life
compare with my giving
for the work of God?”
And perhaps the hardest of all,
“What does my pledge say
about which I love more,
God,

or the things
that money can buy?

It's not
pledge season - yet - wait a few weeks -
and perhaps that's a good thing.
Because it allows us to look honestly
at how we view money in relation to God.
To think about our spending.
To think about where we have become more generous with ourselves
and perhaps not as generous
with God.

So that was the foist part of our reading,
for those who want to be rich.
The second - and you'll be glad to know
that this is much shorter,
is for those who are rich already.

Because by the standards of our world,
we all are.

“Do not be haughty, or to set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, storing up for yourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that really is life.”

In other words,
be humble,
be generous,
give thanks
and trust God.

PRAYER FOR GETTING RICH

Lord, Source of all that is good,
Creator and Sustainer of the universe,
Giver of awesome gifts and undeserved blessings,
Help me to be rich.
Shower me with enough
that I will no longer worry my way through each day,
but instead live in gratitude,
cherishing my utter abundance.
Help me to have enough of this world's treasures
that I may know the joy of sharing what I have,
spreading it around instead of holding on tight.
Let me feel rich with wonder at the great mysteries,
receiving each day with anticipation
of the surprises you have in store for me.
Remind me that my wealth is best measured
in the love that I give and the love that I receive,
And that what I own are small things
compared to the splendor of the stars,
the brightness of sunlight,
the joy of music,
the sweetness of food,
and the glory of this amazingly beautiful world.
Teach me, Lord, to be content,
so that my heart may know peace even in lean times,
and so that my laughter and my joy
may add to the richness of those around me.
And when it is time to leave this world,
let me go with a thankful heart, my Lord,
knowing that, through you,
I have been rich indeed.
Amen.

--Timothy Haut, for September 29, 2013