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Alas for those who are at ease in Zion. Amos 6:1

Sunday by Sunday through late summer and now into early fall, “woe to the rich” seems to have been a recurring theme. Last week was the parable of the dishonest steward. Before that, we heard Jesus say that, if you don't let go of your possessions, you cannot be my disciple. Before that, he told about the rich man busy adding barns and fields. God confronted this man and said “You fool, this very night your soul is demanded of you.”

Preaching on that parable at St. Margaret's, I suggested that for purposes of argument we would assume that I was the fortunate son of prosperous family that had made a lot of money finding oil and making gasoline. I said that as a rich man, “I'm the cat and the Bible is the hot tin roof.”

For our purposes today, let's let the same assumption stand, and in hearing today's gospel you can enjoy the fact that I happen to be clothed in purple and fine linen, just like a certain rich man who finds himself in hell. It is as though Bill Clinton been invited to preach, the text was “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out,” and he processed in vested in a smoking jacket and carrying two glasses and a bottle of Courvoisier.

In today's parable, our rich man in purple and white cries out from Hades appealing for a drop of water—denied; then he begs leave to go back and warn his brothers to repent—again, denied. Abraham, who we learn has been assigned to babysit this sector of the netherworld, tells him his brothers have had warning enough already through Moses and the prophets. The rich man retorts “Well sure, but let's get real: men like my brothers don't pay attention to Moses and the prophets, they listen to Warren Buffett and the *Wall Street Journal*. A visit from me, a ghost, would grab their attention pretty quick I think. It worked for Ebenezer Scrooge.

But Abraham is not persuaded. If the brothers haven't listened to Moses and the prophets, “neither” he says, “will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Luke, our author, expects us, his readers, to recognize a double meaning here. What the rich man asks for has been given, has it not? Whom do we know who has risen from the dead?

With this morning's readings, comes some good spiritual advice on being rich. In our Epistle, we find Paul giving pastoral direction to a new young Vicar, Father Timothy, regarding dealings with certain wealthy members of his congregation.

Perhaps you know this, perhaps you don't: for the clergy, wealthy members present something of a challenge. Partly, this is because the church needs their contributions—

and one untoward word can send a certain kind of rich person out the door. In that case, the church is left with no way to pay the January heating bill. So you definitely don't want to make them mad if you can help it. However, the New Testament makes it very clear that leaders of the church are *not* to show special deference to the rich (Read James 2:1–7). We are to measure generosity not by the dollar size of a contribution, but rather by the sacrifice it represents. (Read Mark 12: 41–44, the story of the widow's mite.)

As a rector, I need the big dollar contributions to build the education wing, where I will teach that those big dollar contributions might not add up to much in the eyes of God. That is the challenge.

St. Paul couldn't care less. He is not concerned about what rich folks can do for the education wing. He is concerned about their souls.

His advice to Timothy starts like this:

“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty.”

“Haughty.” What is that? Let's try this paraphrase.

“Command them not to congratulate themselves for being rich. Command them to bite their tongues off before they use the line: ‘Don't you know who I am?’—and not even to think those words without immediately experiencing a sense of shame.”

“Haughty” means taking pride in being wealthy—as distinct from feeling pride in working hard and drawing satisfaction from a job well done. I'm sure Paul would agree that pride in good hard work is healthy. But taking pride in being rich is hazardous to a soul's health. He says: “Command them” not to do that.

“Command them.” At this point, all the rich and all the clergy in the room may be sharing the same thought: “Good luck with that.”

I think we can assume that the Apostle Paul and Timothy are both aware that the rich do not expect to take commands from clergy. The rich are accustomed to receiving, the clergy to giving, deference. Assuming Paul knows this, let's ask ourselves what else Paul knows that would prompt him to issue such a socially and financially hazardous directive.

Read him and learn. St. Paul knows that our customs of deference have been crafted for survival within a world that is spiraling down into spiritual hopelessness and physical entropy, a world that in the last analysis is doomed. Think: “Titanic.” Strangely, we know this too, but by common agreement we continue to live as though it were not so. Paul calls this agreement life “according to the flesh.”

But St. Paul also knows of life that spirals in the opposite direction, upwards, out of hopelessness and death. There is as it were a spiral staircase, a set of attitudes, customs and habits that sustain this upward movement. Paul calls it life “according to the Spirit.”

As an appointed servant and messenger of Christ, it is Paul, actually, who expects a certain deference—the deference due the emissary of a great benefactor who holds your life in his hands, and whose intentions are good. Reading Paul, we find him willing to pay a certain deference according to the customs and standards of the world (“the flesh”)—but in the way that an emissary of the President of the United States might accord deference to the chiefs and witchdoctors of a newly discovered tribe of pygmies in the South Pacific, adorned with bone necklaces and armed with blowguns.

“Command them,” Paul continues, “not to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”

Let me say what this particular instruction doesn’t mean. The point is not that the rich have only God, as opposed to their own hard work and ingenuity, to thank for their success—as though Wal-Mart and Microsoft dropped down from heaven into the laps of Sam Walton and Bill Gates.

Why do I say that?

Because, supposing Paul *did* mean that, then the corollary would be that the poor have God to thank for their unemployment, cancer patients have God to thank for their fear, nausea and pain, and grieving parents have God to thank for the accidental death of their teenaged son or daughter.

Both sides of that coin show human beings passive and helpless before the irresistible will of Almighty God. This is not the Christian view of either God or human beings.

The Christian view leaves room for freedom. It’s basic idea is stewardship. God bestows gifts and provides the raw material of life. We use these gifts and materials according to our ability, opportunity and inclination. In the end, we are accountable for how we have lived and what we have done with our gifts and opportunities. The Christian view can credit the Gates and Waltons of this world for their achievement. Paul is not denying that.

“Command them,” he is saying, not to get drunk on their success. Advise them that continued success isn’t guaranteed—or don’t they know that this is a world where the rules change with every congressional election, where a trial jury in the Mississippi Delta can turn a Delaware Corporation upside down and shake until there’s nothing left but empty pockets. Warn them that putting their hopes in the wrong place leads sooner or later to disappointment, and finally to destruction. Spiritually, it is building a house on shifting sand.

Show them there is a better way. Teach it to them. Teach them the habit of thanking God who bestows the gifts and supplies the raw materials, abilities, opportunities and inclinations. Guide them “to do good, to be rich in good works, [and] ready to share.” Promise them “the treasure of a good foundation for the future.” Talk to them in their

own language: "It is like building your house on solid rock." These people are smart. They'll get it.

I would like to end by telling you a little story about my father, the late Bishop Christoph Keller, Jr., a man whose drawers and closets were well stocked with purple and fine linen, both literal and otherwise.

Some thirty years ago we went to my sister Elisabeth's college graduation. (Elisabeth is "Sam" to some of you.) It was a bright sunny day in the hills of western Massachusetts and the hills were alive with the sounds of charming, smart and beautiful people everywhere. It was a lot like St. Mark's.

At a point in the proceedings, my father got up to find a restroom. After a while, it began to occur to us that he had been away for a long time and so I went off to find him. I found him in the men's room, and this is what I saw:

My father was with a man who seemed out of place at a Williams College graduation. He was poorly dressed, crippled by some kind of neuro-physical disorder, also I think mentally impaired. He was the kind of man who would frighten little children, whom teenaged boys might taunt, and whom adults would pity.

He had had a problem in the bathroom and it had turned into an awkward, maybe messy, scene.

I doubt there was any person on the Williams College campus who knew less about how to help an afflicted person having a problem in the bathroom than Bishop Christoph Keller, Jr. But when I found him there he was, with that man, in the stall, on the floor, doing what he could, as best he could, to help him. Eventually, the two men walked out the door and down some steps together, rich man-poor man arm-in-arm.

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion.

If I haven't absorbed that lesson, shame on me. It is not as though I wasn't shown a better way.