

Sermon Proper 20 Year C September 22, 2010 by Ron Kolanowski

1% of the world's population controls 40% of the entire world's wealth which exceeds \$125 trillion. About 90% of it is held by North America, Europe and more affluent countries in Asia. Part of the problem in our world and indeed our country today, I believe is these numbers are starting to change and we're just beginning to feel the effects of it.

I was recently at a wedding of a member of my family. My cousin, a relatively well-off individual and I had a conversation about wealth. I said that most experts agree that our children or grandchildren will not do as well or better in the area of material wealth than we have done. He said, "I flatly refuse to believe that." This aspect of the American dream is in jeopardy and many people are like my cousin and fear that reality is coming true. Maybe that's why my cousin Joe has a signed picture of Newt Gingrich in the house that reads, "I can't believe you are related to Ron Kolanowski. Your friend Newt." My cousin and I find ourselves at the opposite end of the political spectrum. To acknowledge that our level of consumerism and material wealth is changing and threatening for many. Those of us who have enjoyed the benefits provided by generations that came before us and know that our kids won't do better can make us feel like failures.

A couple of weeks ago on public radio there was an interview with presidential advisor David Gergen who served presidents Nixon, Reagan,

Ford, Clinton and George H.W. Bush talked about this phenomenon. He said that a good friend of his at Harvard teaches a class called the rise of the West. He is now rethinking the title of that class to be called the Rise of the Rest. The fact that global wealth is in the process of being redistributed in which the west and particularly the U.S. will not be THE dominant player can be unsettling to many Americans.

Wealth, and our identity around wealth is at the heart of today's message from our gospel. It's hard to talk about money in church and I rarely do, but today's gospel forces us to look at our relationship to wealth, what we have, and more importantly our identity.

One of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire Bible, the parable of the dishonest manager presses the question of identity. The parable lacks a hero, and it's not entirely clear why Jesus praises the manager. As the story begins, the manager stands between the rich man and the impoverished tenant farmers. He identifies with the rich man, who provides the manager's meal ticket. The manager is not innocent. Yet when the manager finds his position stripped from him, he has to find a new place to stand. No longer may he give his loyalty to the rich man, who bears him no good will. So he joins the poor, the debtors who have no hope of ever repaying their obligations. Maybe the manager's wisdom resides in the choice to identify himself among the victims and the powerless?

I think one of the problems we have in our culture today is that more people identify with Bill Gates or Donald Trump than they do with the working poor or the peasants in our story today. If you don't believe me, all you have to do is travel down the road to Foxwoods or back across the bridge to Mohegan Sun to see hundreds of people who are there right now **believing** they are just one slot machine pull away from hitting it big. Or, many people see themselves as one lottery ticket away from being in the same club as the wealthy in our society. And, yet the statistics are clear one percent of Americans controls 38% of all the wealth, the top 10% controlling 71%. That being the case what about the other 90% of us? The truth is that most of us have more in common with the working poor than we do with those who occupy the top one percent. Yet our culture would have us identify more with the rich than the non-rich.

I've talked before about a theological principle known as the Preferential Option. The preferential option states that God seems to prefer the poor. Why?? Is it more noble to be poor than have material resources? I don't think that's the point. What is the point? The poor, because they don't have much, have to place their trust and hope in something other than material wealth. Maintaining wealth and things takes a lot of energy. The poor are less burdened by this and God becomes more central to their well-being on a day to day basis. Just ask those who came back from Ecuador. There is a deep faith and hope among the people that God will provide what is needed rather than concerns over building up material wealth. Secondly, in spite of their lack of wealth they are willing to share

what they have with one another rather than keep it for themselves. As George Warner says, they seem closer to the very source of things that they need for daily survival.

Maybe that's why the manger in our gospel was praised by Jesus. He chose to stand with the poor after he was dismissed by the rich man, placing him closer to his reliance on God.

So, the question I pose for each of us today is where do we stand? Do we stand closer to Donald Trump, or with those who are a few paychecks away from poverty? I don't know about you, but that's not a hard question for me to answer. The hard part is to remember that in God's abundance there is enough and more than enough. I need to stand in a place in which God becomes the source of my hope and security not money. And, that ain't easy. Amen.