The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (2/17/19) 

Jeremiah 17:5-10 ~ Psalm 1 ~ 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 ~ Luke 6:17-26

The Rev’d Joseph Wolyniak

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The former CEO of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, recently made waves after floating interest in running as an independent in the 2020 presidential election. In one of many interviews after signaling his candidacy, Schultz was asked point-blank: “Do you agree that billionaires have too much power in American public life?” His off-the-cuff response gained a lot of attention—and derision.

“The moniker billionaire now has become [a] catchphrase,” Schultz lamented, suggesting that he and others with billions in assets be referred to instead as “people of means” and “people of wealth.”

Arwa Mahdawi, a Guardian op-ed columnist, was among those quick to jump the suggestion:

“While Schultz’s clumsy attempt to rebrand the term billionaire is amusing,” she said, “it’s also instructive. You see, what [Schultz] unsuccessfully tried to do in that interview is what the super-rich have successfully been doing for a very long time: justifying their unjustifiable fortunes by deploying strategic euphemisms. Spinning inequality with disingenuous synonyms. You could call it ‘wealth-washing.’”

Her point: The accumulation of such vast wealth into the hands of the few is a global problem to admit and address, not avoid.

And Mahdawi’s concerns about the billionaire class are grounded in more than grammar. A recent Oxfam report, released January 22nd (just before the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland), noted that 82% of the wealth generated last year went to the richest 1% of the global population—while the 3.7 billion people who make up the poorest half of the world saw no increase in wealth whatsoever.  

In fact, the Oxfam report notes that over the last decade, billionaire wealth has risen by an annual average of 13%—six times faster than the wages of ordinary workers, which have risen by a yearly average of just 2%. Here in the US, it takes just over one working day for a billionaire CEO to earn what an ordinary worker makes in a year.

The Executive Director of Oxfam, Winnie Byanyima, surmised: “The billionaire boom is not a sign of a thriving [global] economy but a symptom of a failing economic system. The people who make our clothes, assemble our phones and grow our food are being exploited to ensure a steady supply of cheap goods, and swell the profits of corporations and billionaire investors.”

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This is, arguably, what irked so many about Schultz’s remark. His euphemistic sidestep doesn’t allow us to address the glaring and growing inequalities that are plaguing our world.

Schultz is not alone. I’d be willing to wager that Schultz’s attempted euphemistic sidestep is actually something we’ve all been guilty of. No, perhaps none of us have ever had the privilege of trying to avoid the billionaire “moniker,” but—on a less extreme register—all of us have fallen prey to this logic of self-exoneration: where we let ourselves off the hook of being “rich” because, unless you’re Jeff Bezos, there’s always someone richer.

Do we suffer from acquisitiveness? Yeah, well, maybe… but there’s always someone who’s acquiring more. Look at that person! What about them?!

But we are rich. All of us.

Did you go to sleep last night with a roof over your head? Did you have a meal this morning or are you planning on having one this afternoon and evening? Did you come to church fully clothed?

We are rich. All of us.

The problem of inequality in this world, whether we’re talking about wealth or hunger, is not a matter of scarcity or lack but overabundance and maldistribution. We, every single one of us, are a part of that problem. And we can be a part of the solution.

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In our gospel this morning, we hear what we might think of as Jesus’s famous “beatitudes.” And there are two different accounts of a similar teaching in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

In Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 5), Jesus delivers what we now call the Sermon on the Mount: evoking memories of Moses, the lawgiver, who likewise went up to the mountain to first retrieve then impart the commandments of God (or the “Ten Best Ways,” as we call them in Godly Play). In Matthew’s account, this Moses-esque-Jesus-on-the-mount pronounces a series of blessings, or beatitudes: blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, and so on. Jesus in Matthew’s gospel seems concerned primarily with the inward disposition—poverty of spirit, peacefulness in the face of violence and revilement, and so on, reminding God’s people how to live with godly resolve amid the external pressures of this world.

But we didn’t hear Matthew’s Gospel this morning; we heard Luke’s, with a different backdrop and upshot. Jesus, first of all, isn’t sitting down on a mountainside, but standing “on a level place” (Luke 6.17), which also evokes Moses, but in a different time and place—now at the other end of the wilderness journey, on the plain just before crossing into the Promised Land, where Moses poignantly pauses, just before Israel enters in, and reminds them of the covenant they have made with God. In what we call Deuteronomy (from the Greek, deuteros + nomos, or “second law”), Moses reminds the people of Israel who they are, who God has called them to be—complete with the blessings that come to those who follow the way of God, and the curses that inevitably befall those who stray from it.
“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses,” Moses says to his kin at the end of his life and journey with them. “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days” (Deuteronomy 30.19-20).

It is this, the latter Moses, that Jesus in Luke’s account seems to channel in his Sermon on the Plain—complete with three blessings, but also three woes, or warnings of cursedness. Blessed are you who are poor, Jesus exclaims, but woe to you who are rich. Blessed are you who are hungry; woe to you who are full.

What does he mean by this? Well, in short, he means what he says.

Jesus, in Luke’s version, is unabashedly concerned with economic, social, and political conditions. He is not talking in the abstract, spiritualizing wealth and poverty. He’s talkin’ about rich folk and poor folk, hungry folk and fed folk. He ain’t talkin’ in the abstract, he’s talkin’ about you and me and our neighbors near and far.

Jesus us challenging us to see both the great reversal in God’s inbreaking kingdom, God’s economy—where the power, wealth, privilege that buys access in this world will not buy access in God’s soon-coming kingdom. Instead, those lacking here will suddenly find themselves rich there; those rich here may well suddenly find themselves penniless and penurious there.

And we, friends, are the rich ones Jesus is talking about.

However much we may wish to think ourselves exonerated from such woeful warnings because, well, there’s always someone richer, Jesus is speaking directly to me and you—candidly, frankly, if lovingly changeling us to take stock of where we are in this life, and to structure our lives toward that more determinative reality than the present: the life in the world to come.

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The question before us this morning, as we hear again these challenging teachings of Our Lord—betokening blessings and warning woes—is how will we inhabit our relative wealth, the privileges of life that we enjoy, our richness? For to call ourselves “Christian” is to be a follower of Jesus, to heed both his assurances and his admonitions, to be disciples—that is, literally, “learners” who follow his teachings as a way of life.

And we are the rich he’s talking to, individually and corporately.

Individually, Jesus’s blessings and woes should challenge us to examine our relationship with what we have—asking, always, to what extent our possessions possess us. How can we inhabit our given and acquired station in life in ways that benefit not just ourselves and those within our immediate remit, but the common good—truly loving our neighbors as ourselves? How might we, as Christians, seek a downward mobility that runs counter to that all-American upward mobility? Do we, as Christians, need to think about ways we could downgrade our lives to, as Mahatma Gandhi is said to have put it, live more simply so others may simply live? Might the upcoming Lenten season in a just a few weeks’ time occasion an opportunity to practice such self-denial, giving up what we do not need and giving of our largess to others?
Corporately, how might we faithfully inhabit the privileged position of this parish—especially as one chapter in our 150-year history ends and another begins. As you, the people of this parish, think about who you are and who you are called to be as a community of faith, you will have the opportunity to reflect on the many, many, many gifts that this church has to offer. The matchless beauty of this sanctuary (in a world subject to blight and blasé); the wonderment instilled in our children (in a world subject to stifled imagination); [the magnificence of this choir, now led by a new, exceptionally talented and equally unassuming organist and choirmaster (in a world overrun with vapid pop and vainglory);] a generous and healthy budget, a supportive endowment, and, yet still more, successful stewardship and capital campaigns (in a world of seeming scarcity); and most of all, you, as a people—kindhearted, generous, committed, neighborly as you are. How do we, corporately, as a parish, evermore fully inhabit the incredible richness of this place in ways that are truly a blessing to others, most especially the poor—in this city, our diocese, and the wider world? How do we not fall prey to that instinct churches sometimes have to just hunker down and hoard? How do we share, continue to share, evermore fully, innovatively, creatively, imaginatively share the richness of this place?

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Jesus, like Moses before him, stands on a plain and sets blessings and woes before anyone who had ears to hear—urging us to choose God’s best ways, to choose life.

In God’s kingdom, those who we think blessed and those we think cursed reverse roles.

How do we begin to live that divinely determined future here and now, individually and corporately? How do we not sidestep but embrace and inhabit our this-worldly richness? How do we, individually and corporately, faithfully acknowledge and inhabit our richness? How will we heed his words?

\textit{Amen.}