

Old Testament Lesson—1 Kings 10:14-27

The weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred sixty-six talents of gold, besides that which came from the traders and from the business of the merchants, and from all the kings of Arabia and the governors of the land. King Solomon made two hundred large shields of beaten gold; six hundred shekels of gold went into each large shield. He made three hundred shields of beaten gold; three minas of gold went into each shield; and the king put them in the House of the Forest of Lebanon. The king also made a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps. The top of the throne was rounded in the back, and on each side of the seat were arm rests and two lions standing beside the arm rests, while twelve lions were standing, one on each end of a step on the six steps. Nothing like it was ever made in any kingdom. All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were of silver—it was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon. For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks. Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought a present, objects of silver and gold, garments, weaponry, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. Solomon gathered together chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedars as numerous as the sycamores of the Shephelah.

New Testament Lesson—Matthew 6:24-34

"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Part of me hopes the author of 1 Kings was embellishing like crazy here when he's describing Solomon's wealth.

I don't know...just something about one of Israel's greatest and wisest kings—the builder of God's holy Temple, the son of David, being gilded and bejeweled and plastering everything with gold just makes me uncomfortable...

I get uncomfortable (I think) because, well, I believe Jesus is right: *No one can serve two masters; you can't serve God and wealth.* I can't help it. I just get the “ick” when powerful leaders have such an insatiable desire for excess and opulence. You know what I mean?

I don't know. I suppose I just question how someone like Solomon can serve God and also be swimming in money, valuables, and resources—especially since serving God also meant

serving the poor, the outcast, and the most vulnerable—the forgotten of society—those without a single shekel to their name.

Listen: I'm not saying it's *impossible* for someone with such massive wealth to empathize with those who have nothing; but I have to imagine reaching that level of riches doesn't make it *easier* to relate to the "least of these."

Yes, Jesus preaches about the Kingdom of Heaven more than anything else. But the topic of money isn't too far behind. And there are some good reasons why Christ talks about it so much. He understands the role of currency to a functioning society. He knows how the economy works.

However: He's also inherited a consistent, long-standing Jewish tradition—a prophetic tradition that calls into question how everything's supposed to work. It calls into question whether we actually get it at all—whether we've really been listening—and if we're honestly trying to follow God's commandments.

Jesus follows a long line of prophets who aren't afraid to speak truth to power. And the prophets knew that where there is power, there's usually wealth (and vice versa). The prophets knew God had created a world with enough resources for everyone—enough food, enough water, enough shelter, enough everything.

It's why the prophets come down so hard on human greed. It's why they're so insistent that a society has to lift up its poor and vulnerable—has to care for its aliens, outcasts, and widows. In the abundant world God has made, there is no reason why anyone should go without—no reason why any person or group should be neglected.

God's prophets get mad as all get out when they see people starving. They are furious when they see oppression and those with the most exploiting those with the least. It is a distortion of the created order. It's a perversion of what stewardship is supposed to look like.

From the perspective of prophets like Jesus, it's plain and simple: This is not okay; and there will be consequences for what we've done.

You see: When human beings start acting like we're solely responsible for what we have—when we pretend we can somehow procure our own blessings, well, we've seriously missed the mark. I mean, at that point, the mark isn't even a blip on our radar. It might as well not exist.

Siblings in Christ: The *Lord* is our Provider—full stop—from every breath we get to breathe to the wifi we use to the lunch we'll enjoy after worship. We are dependent on God's grace. So, the second we think we've become anything more than *stewards* of the resources and blessings in our lives, then it's time to pause and reconsider our place in the world.

I came across a beautiful Latin American prayer this week that I wanted to share with you. It goes like this: "O God: to those who hunger, give bread. And to those who have bread, give the hunger for justice." Simple, but powerful. Right? I love this because it's both a prayer for help and a call to justice. It's a comfort to the afflicted and affliction for the comfortable.

Every Sunday when it's time for the sermon, we preachers often go back and forth between offering pastoral care (at one end) and offering a prophetic, challenging word at the other. Sometimes, our community needs a strong word of hope and encouragement. Other times, it needs a loving reminder that we've got work to do.

One of the things I like most about Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is how Jesus seems to easily weave the pastoral and the prophetic together. And one of the best examples of this is right here when Jesus asks his disciples to consider the lilies of the field.

Our lesson from Scripture this morning is, arguably, the most quoted passage about wealth in the Bible. Yes, Jesus touches on greed and the lust for money elsewhere. But here he really hammers it home—putting money in its proper place.

I read that wild passage about Solomon’s absolutely ridiculous wealth because I want you to notice how easily—how intentionally Jesus casts it aside: *Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.*

Not even Solomon was adorned with as much beauty and majesty. The world gawks in wonder and envy at the riches of such a king. But, according to Christ, Solomon and those like him can’t hold a candle to the abundance God has made for everyone to enjoy. According to Christ, true riches come from the practice of noticing God’s generosity in our daily lives.

In other words: If we were to count out all those “tiny” blessings we receive every single day—if we actually acknowledged them all—from the bifocals we wear to the Bluetooth connection in our cars to the running water we use to brush our teeth—if we tallied all those up, we truly would be richer than Solomon in all his glory.

You see: Noticing the abundance around us—doing so as a spiritual discipline—it not only makes us wealthy with God’s graces, but also helps us to give thanks. You can’t be grateful for what you don’t notice.

And so: To his disciples then and now, Jesus offers a reminder that we are blessed—offers pastoral care we can take with us. And in the very next breath almost, Christ moves toward a prophetic word...Christ calls us to action.

No, Jesus isn’t saying that poverty’s not real. He’s not claiming that no one abuses their wealth and power. Of course the world is filled with gross inequity.

But those who trust in God—those in it for the long haul—we don’t have to worry ourselves to death about things we can’t control. Instead, we can do what we’re made to do today: we can love God and love neighbor with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

We can continue the justice-building efforts of the prophets. We can strive for the Kingdom of Heaven and God’s righteousness. We can do what matters most right now. God’s taking care of the rest.

Look at the birds of the air. Look at the lilies of the field. They’re made to reflect the beauty of Creation in all its glorious diversity. And my how wonderfully they fulfill their purpose.

May we follow their powerful example, siblings in Christ. After all: If God so clothes the grass of the field, imagine how completely we must be loved.

Amen.