



THE LENTEN MEDITATIONS 2023 – WEEK 3

HOPE AND THE RICH YOUNG RULER

BY TARA LUDWIG

If we were asked to envision in our minds an image of someone who was hopeless, most of us would picture a person with slumped shoulders, a sad frown, and a tear-stained face. Few, if any of us, would imagine someone smiling on a tropical beach, a diamond-laden celebrity on the red carpet, or a rich CEO driving his yacht. And yet hopelessness might be found in all of these people; hopelessness is not a malady reserved only for the poor and downtrodden, it also afflicts the hearts of the wealthy, the beautiful, the popular, the successful, and the powerful. Our exterior appearance and circumstances do not always accurately reflect the reality of our interior landscape, and everyone, even those who seemingly have every privilege, can lose touch with what true hope really looks like.

Jesus encountered this when he met with a rich young ruler, as we'll hear now in the Gospel of Matthew:

And someone came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Then he said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But when the young man heard this statement, he went away sad; for he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were



greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”
(Matthew 19:16-26)

Now, it’s possible that this rich young man walked away to think more deeply about what Jesus had said to him, and eventually chose to accept Jesus’ counsel. But it’s also possible that he just could not believe that Jesus had something better to offer him than what he already had, which, as the scripture tells us, was a lot of fancy stuff. Many of us might have done the same; because even in our modern culture we are indoctrinated with the idea that to be wealthy and successful is the ultimate aspiration; it might not occur to us that there is anything greater left to hope for. So, it is always a danger that our attachment to money can become dis-ordered; as early Christians were advised in 1st Timothy, “command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything”.

But the rich ruler, as one who already had money, power, status, all the treasures a person could ever hope for, only understood forsaking his privileged life as a *loss*; it was beyond the limits of his imagination to conceive what treasures he might gain from giving away all he had in order to follow Jesus.

As the young ruler walks away, we hear Jesus reflect on how hard it will be for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven. And I think we tend to hear that comment as a sweeping judgment of character, as if Jesus is saying that all the wealthy are so morally lacking that most of them won’t merit a pass into Heaven. But that’s how *we* think, not how *God* thinks, and so I don’t believe that’s really what Jesus meant. I think Jesus, with gentleness and compassion, was expressing an insight here about how bound we are by the enchantment of wealth; Jesus understood that it would be harder for the wealthy, those like the rich young man, to recognize him for what he really was- a hope even greater than everything they already had.

In my favorite Janis Joplin song, she sings that “freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose”. And time and time again throughout the scriptures we see that it was those with nothing left to lose- lepers, prostitutes, paralytics, the blind- who were most free to place their hope in Jesus. Unencumbered by the luxuries and comforts that were enjoyed by the rest of society, it was they who most easily recognized real hope when they saw it with such clarity in the person of Jesus Christ. The rich young man, who had so much to



lose, was NOT free, was too attached to his possessions to lay hope in something greater, even when Hope Itself stood right in front of him.

So, my invitation to you, as I send you off into your life in this third week of Lent, is to reflect on the hopes and dreams you have for your life- those you've already fulfilled and those you have yet to accomplish. Allow yourself to wonder, are they hopes that are too small? And if you were to ask God what *his* hopes and dreams for your life might be, what would he say?

I'll leave you today with this quote from Trappist Monk and social activist, Thomas Merton:

“Why should I want to be rich when You were poor? Why should I desire to be famous and powerful in the eyes of men when some of those who exalted the false prophet and stoned the true rejected You and nailed You to the Cross? Why should I cherish in my heart a hope that devours me--the hope for perfect happiness in this life--when such hope, doomed to frustration, is nothing but despair?”

May the hope of Christ fill you and enfold you in this third week of Lent. Amen