

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Recently I heard about an old miser who had saved over a million dollars. He had worked hard all his life and was looking forward to retiring and spend his golden years fishing down in the Florida Keys. But, unfortunately he was diagnosed with terminal cancer and told he only had three months to live. He asked his wife to promise him that she would bury the million dollars with him, and she could live on the hundred or so thousand left over. Dutifully, his wife made a solemn promise that she would do as he asked. Some weeks later the old miser died and before the undertaker closed the casket, the wife stepped forward and placed a carved wooden box in the casket with her beloved husband. After the burial, her sister came to her and said, “Martha, please tell me you didn’t bury the million dollars with him, did you?” “I surely did. I made a promise and I keep my word.” “Oh, no!” cried her sister, “How could you?” Martha smiled sweetly and said, “Oh, it was easy. I wrote a check!”

She wasn’t one of my favorite comediennes, but every now and then, Joan Rivers, who died last year, came out with a zinger. She once said something with which many people would agree: “People say that money isn’t the key to happiness, but I always figured if you have enough money, you can have a key made.”

“...if you have enough money.” How much is enough money? When is enough...enough?

The man we read about in today’s Gospel was a fine, upstanding person of great wealth. He’s a gracious man who gets a little carried away in his flattery of Jesus when he addresses him as “Good Teacher”. In doing so, he violated proper Jewish etiquette. Jesus corrects him, “No one is good but God alone”, and in doing so is cautioning him not to put his ultimate confidence in teachers or powerful people but only in God. Though this man was just, faithfully living according to the Mosaic Law, seen as blessed by all because of his wealth, he is still anxious, concerned about his salvation.

Jesus sees him for the good man he is and St. Mark tells us that seeing all the goodness and righteousness in the man, Jesus “loved” him. He wanted him to become one of his disciples. He saw the promise in the man. He knew he could do great things in building up the Kingdom of God that Jesus was establishing on the earth. Maybe Jesus even saw in him the one who could continue his work and build up his church, rather than the somewhat boisterous, uneducated fisherman, Peter.

So, the Lord tells him, “You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” What comes next is maybe the saddest verse in the Bible. I suspect it broke the heart of Jesus, as well as that of the young man: “At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions

Imagine! He was in the presence of the Lord Himself who was asking him to follow him. He could have perhaps led the Church rather than Peter. He may have written one of the Gospels. His name might be blessed even until now, rather than being the nameless rich young man. Rather, he walked away sad “because he had many possessions” that he just couldn’t let go of. Can you even imagine that that sadness ever left him?

In his sadness “Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’” The disciples were amazed at this. So Jesus repeats himself. “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God” It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.”

The disciples were exceedingly astonished by this because they believed then, as many believe now, if God blessed people with riches on earth, they would be blessed for all eternity. So they ask, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus replies, “For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.”

Notice Jesus is not saying that wealthy people can’t get to heaven. But he certainly is intimating that those who put their wealth before God are in danger. He is suggesting that those who enjoy their wealth while turning a blind eye to the needs of the poor are in trouble. He is making it clear that people are in danger when their great purpose in life is to accumulate more and more and more. When is enough...enough?

I have a high school classmate who became a brilliant surgeon. Even as a medical student he was concerned about his retirement. He’d say, “I can only work as long as my hands last. After that, I’ll have to rely on what I’ve saved.” So, that became the focal point of his life. He worked obscenely long hours, often seven days a week. He rarely had time or took time for his wife and children. In fact, he came to resent them because they always had needs that cost money. He hated spending money. Well he finally retired last year when he turned 70. Though he had built a fine mansion at the foot of a mountain, it has become a toxic waste dump. You see he has become so obsessively possessive of all that he has acquired in life, including all the magazines that ever sat in his waiting room and all the furniture that was in his offices, that it all sits rotting, mildewed and moldy in the basement of his mansion. Though he had the opportunity to donate the furniture and all kinds of medical supplies to the Medical Mission Sisters for their missions, he just couldn’t bring himself to part with it. So it rots. And he rots, sitting alone among all the mold and mildew he has acquired in life. His wife travels as often as possible, visiting their children and grandchildren; but the children never visit or talk to him; and his grandchildren are scared to death of him. Now wealthy and retired, he is the most miserable, lonely man I have ever known.

However, it is not only wealth or the desire for it that can make our lives miserable. It is whatever that we put first in our lives before God. Let me phrase that another way. What is it that keeps you from doing something great for God? Is it your job? Is it your family? Is it time playing computer games or watching sports on TV or conversing with your friends on Facebook or whatever social media is in vogue today? Could I look at your Visa statement or your computer log or your day planner on your i-phone and discover what really matters to you? Where do you devote your time, your money, your dreams, your energy? Is it the accumulation of ever more wealth, ever more toys? Jesus said, "Where a man's treasure is, there will his heart be also."

The question before us today is if you had enough of everything that you wanted, would it ever be enough? I hope and pray that you have discovered by now that there's not enough money, not enough work, not enough sex, not enough alcohol or narcotics to ease the pain of an empty and unfulfilled heart.

A wise man once said, "To achieve happiness by a succession of pleasures is like trying to keep a light lit all night by striking successive matches." Happiness comes not from pleasure or possessions, but from purpose. The happiest people I've known are people who have given their lives completely and unreservedly to God.

I'm not talking about just the great people I've been blessed to meet like Mother Katherine Drexel or Mother Teresa or Sr. Mary Scullion, who has done so much to care for the homeless in Philadelphia. I'm talking about people like Paula Smith, whose funeral we celebrated yesterday, who was remembered for all her acts of kindness to people she hardly knew. People like Jean Moulder who quietly goes about doing good for others every day; people like Joanne Cardine who is determined to keep praising God as our music director even as she battles cancer daily; people like Joe Dagney who has dedicated his life to leading young people to Christ; people like Alan Reger who leads the PCCO effort to serve those in need in our community; people like you who quietly provided food and service at yesterday's luncheon for Paula's family, not because they needed it, but because you needed to give of yourselves. Yes, I am talking about people just like you who give generously of yourselves, of your time, your talents, and your treasure in helping others, in caring for your elders, and raising your children to the glory of God, in doing what you can to make of this old world a new world. You who put God first in your lives are finding happiness, fulfillment, and joy in this life. In doing so, you also give answer to the rich, young man's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"