

I started discerning a vocation to holy orders when I was in college. One of the first formal steps that I took was attending a diocesan event with the refreshingly straightforward name of “Priest Information Day.” I still remember a few parts of the day vividly. One was a priest who was ordained in his early 20s at a time when the Episcopal Church had decided that people couldn’t possibly be called to be priests if they hadn’t already had a prior career and lots of “life experience.” Quoting the First Letter of Timothy, he told us, “Let no one despise your youth,” and more generally, don’t let people confuse superficial attributes like age, race, class, or sex with the question of vocation, which goes as deep as our souls. A second was that I was paired up with a great conversation partner, who was a priest and is now a bishop. A third was that they had some really good cookies, and hey, hospitality is important.

But the fourth, last, and perhaps most important thing I remember about that day was something the bishop said. He pointed out that taking new vows does not release one from any others, or diminish the seriousness and sacredness of them. He told us that the people who had been counting on us before we were ordained would just as much be counting on us after, and that working for the church often meant a dramatic reduction in our standard of living. Undoubtedly speaking from experience, he talked about how sometimes, people with good intentions will be so excited and determined to take their ordination vows that they forget about other responsibilities they already have, especially to spouses and children, and that can cause serious problems for everyone.

They were bracing words, and I have always been grateful for them. If he had blithely encouraged us, perhaps waved away any concerns by breezily saying, “for God all things are possible” while ignoring human nature, experience, and the sobering context of that saying, he would have been doing a great disservice to both us and the church. Sometimes, the best way to prompt deep, life-changing introspection is to confront people with a hard truth, head on.

Jesus did just that when the rich man approached him with a spiritual crisis. Jesus looked deeply at the man, saw everything there was to see in him, and loved him. Jesus saw through his education, wealth, and privilege, through his weirdly obsequious greeting, through his practiced obedience to religious law, saw right through to the fear the rich man had been trying desperately to hide or tame. Jesus also knew why the man was afraid, identified the subtle error that so many people make. You don’t have to be Jesus to find it though, if you know where to look.

Everybody breezes past the rich man’s question itself because we get fixated on Jesus’s prescription about giving up possessions. We’re so shocked by what Jesus said that we miss the *non sequitur* that tells us so much about where the rich man went wrong: “What must I *do* to *inherit*...?” I almost wish Jesus had said, to receive your inheritance... you must spend one night in a haunted house! But by definition, an inheritance is *not earned*. The rich man should have known this only too well: even if he didn’t inherit his wealth, he would have had to decide how to dispose of it.

We tend to think of wealth as a blessing, and it can be, but only if it is used in accordance with God's will. Like people now, ancient people thought wealth was a sign that God favored a particular person. The rich man would have been doubly shocked, both because of the cultural assumption, and because some of his religious obligations, which clearly were important to him, required a certain level of wealth to fulfil. But the Law and its obligations were only a means to the end of living in the fullness of God's love, both now and in eternity. And God is a generous giver, more generous than any of us could be.

But the hard truth remains. Even though Jesus was speaking to one person, and speaking out of love, when he said, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor," we know on a gut level that wealth can separate us from God, and that separation from God is worse than anything else we could experience.

The danger, though, is not wealth in and of itself. Jesus points us in the right direction when he says, "for God all things are possible." God *wants* salvation to be possible for everyone, and therefore, it is. We can't *earn* salvation any more than we can earn an inheritance. The gates of heaven are wide open to all comers. But we have to be willing to leave behind our wealth, our sin, and literally everything else, because the truth of both heaven and earth is that God is most important, and everything else has to get in line behind God. Letting go is hard — letting go of wealth is hard enough, but letting go of control, letting go of judging our own and others' worthiness, and letting go of unchristian principles can be harder still.

As Christians, we're supposed to know that, and I guess now this congregation does. Which raises the question: does this knowledge make a difference? Does our knowledge of this wonderful good news change our lives? If we don't have to worry about salvation, don't have to live in fear, what will we do with ourselves this side of heaven? God gives us great freedom, but God also shows us what will satisfy us, versus what will leave us anxious and unsatisfied.

Have you ever met a happy, well-adjusted hoarder? I haven't. Hoarding our time and money, our attention and concern, ends for us the way it does for the rich man in today's Gospel: "he was shocked and went away grieving." On the other hand, generosity, with our money, our lives, our hearts, is deeply rewarding. And Advent offers so much proof of that. We are continually "Renewing gratitude, celebrating resurrection."

Every good thing that happens here happens because our parishioners are so generous with their time and money. That bishop at "Priest Information Day" was speaking to a very specific audience, but the principle that we have to strike a careful, thoughtful, prayerful balance between competing obligations is universal. That balance comes out of private discernment, where we are completely honest with ourselves about who we are, what's most important to us, and how we might plausibly get from where we are to where we want to be. If our choices don't match our values, then

something needs to change. The rich man could have chosen to be with Jesus right then and there, but he wasn't as ready to devote himself to God's will as he thought he was, and he "went away grieving."

This week, we'll be receiving pledge cards in the mail. Next Sunday is Commitment Sunday, when we'll bring our cards to church and I'll bless them, and thank God for stirring our hearts to generosity. So this week I hope you'll join me in thinking and praying hard about how richly God has blessed us, how important Advent's sacred mission and ministry are, and how you might respond to the opportunity to align this choice with your values. I hope you'll join me in making a generous pledge to Advent.

All of us have experienced God's love here, in marvelously different ways. God's love makes us precious, so precious to God that God offers forgiveness and redemption to all of us, so precious that to achieve this God gave the greatest gift, paid a greater price than all the wealth of the world, the death of the Son of God. Jesus's resurrection, in turn, shows us that the Kingdom of God is real, good, and true, and likewise, by giving of ourselves, we can give God's kingdom to the world.