

“WHAT IS YOUR LIFE?”

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 31, 2022

based on Luke 12:13-21

Twice in my life I've had the pleasure of visiting the Museum of Welsh Life in a little village called St. Fagan's, just outside of Cardiff, Wales. It's located on a large acreage where they have literally gathered cottages, a medieval church, a school, and several business buildings from all over Wales. There is also a series of early 19th century row houses. These are what today we might call, tiny townhouses. They offer as small a space as a human family can inhabit. I know that many families make due with one room homes and just fine, but I sensed that these were the smallest you could live in with any hope of the least amount of privacy and dignity.

One of those houses captured my heart. Its accommodations dated it to 1855. The plan was the same as all the rest -- an open room with a fire in the front of the place. A room in back which served as a kitchen and bedroom for the master and spouse. Then up a stair that was more a ladder than a stair was a room the size of the downstairs, but only about four feet high. Adults could crawl in but it was just right for small children. What captured my heart was what was placed lovingly over the fire place. It was the one of the few decorations in the house. One little white dish with a pink border and black writing that said simply, "Thou GOD Seest Me." You want to know how small a person can feel in this world and still have a sense he or she is a person? It's someone who puts those four words over his or her small hearth.

It was a life that was clearly poor in every aspect, not destitute, just poor in the plainest way, and maybe, just maybe, rich in one way; rich toward God.

That's where I want to go with this sermon. That's where I want to end up, because that is where Jesus ends up in telling the parable we have come to know as "The Parable of the Rich Fool." Here are his words in ending it: "So it is with those who store up riches for themselves but are not rich toward God."

The trouble is many discussions of this parable end up just short of those last words. Many merely end up using the parable as a club to beat the rich over the head.

Well, that's easy to do. Jesus said more about wealth than he said about any other moral issue of his day. Barbara Brown Taylor has said, "If we could buy a green letter edition of the Bible, with all of those passages highlighted in U. S. Department of the Treasury green ink, it would be hard for any of us to deny that the gap between rich and poor concerned Jesus more than lying, more than stealing, more than sex—especially in Luke's gospel, where he confronts the rich four times as often as he does in the other gospels."

Biblical scholars call this evidence of God's "preferential option for the poor," which means, roughly, that given a choice between siding with a rich person and siding with a poor person, God is going to choose the poor person every time—not because they are more virtuous, necessarily, but because if God weren't on their side, no one would be?

Goliath would win over little David every time. So God stands with the little people, and when the big people come at them, God lets them know that-- sooner or later, in this world or the next—the rich and poor, the happy and sad – are going to change places.

This parable, set for today is so contemporary, you know, telling us about a rich man who has his eye on a piece of valuable real estate near the center of town and right on a street with plans for a new trolley line. It was a puny little three bedroom, but it had some charm and definite historical value. It was old and the Schnitzers, or the Corbetts lived there once, or maybe the family's name was Meier, and the man of means with the big barns full of stuff hoped the city was going to let him pull the rickety thing down and build something there with at least seven bedrooms and an underground garage.

Who wouldn't want to do that, given an ample enough bank account? Besides, in the first century it was commonly believed that if you were rich it was because you were righteous, God fearing.

You deserved what you had. And if you were poor or sick it was because you must have been very wicked and God had judged you for it.

Those who obeyed God were blessed with material rewards and those who did not were condemned to poverty, which worked out nicely on two counts. It not only allowed the rich to enjoy their riches; it also allowed them to walk past the beggars who slept by their garbage cans without even looking down at them.

Who were THEY, after all, to interfere with the judgment God had arranged for those poor souls? The best thing was to leave well enough alone. Let the poor pick themselves up and dust themselves off. Let them try harder to do what was right, and God might smile on them, too. That was the message of the rich to the poor in Jesus' day and the temple authorities backed that up and it's still pretty much the message of the churches most of the rich attend today.

It's called "Health and Wealth Theology" and it's been around since the Bible. Jesus could not stand it, and what he really hated was that way of interpreting scripture so as to justify the self-obsessions of the rich.

Now, there was plenty in the writings called "Moses and the Prophets" that went the other way, but those were **not** the passages the rich people read out loud. No way. So, near the end of the Beatitudes Jesus says, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" just to be sure they got the idea. See how easy it is to beat up on the wealthy?

Now get a load of this: In the early 1830s, the French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting our young nation, was struck by what he called the "general equality of condition among American people." Few were very rich, and few were terribly poor, and de Tocqueville felt that this was fertile soil for the development of true democracy. And it was. And it remained this way for a good long time.

Due to economic development, expanded educational opportunities, and government programs, by the 1970s America had become about as economically egalitarian as it had ever been.

Social security, veterans housing programs, the G.I. bill, the civil rights movement, all contributed to enhanced economic equality.

And then we changed. Beginning in the 1970s, continuing through the 1980s, the 1990s and 2000s, most of our economic growth benefited the wealthiest among us. Today the gap (chasm really) between the poorest and the wealthiest is larger than at any point ever.

The CEO-worker pay gap at low-wage corporations in the United States is widening, according to a new report by the Institute for Policy Studies.

The average CEO is making \$670 to every \$1 of the median US worker.

I remember it being \$300 to \$1 very recently. We were appalled by that.

But, you know, the numbers don't matter as much as the trend. It can't predict good for America if it goes on and on. It can't predict good for the poor and, I hasten to add, it can't predict good for the super-rich, either. Maybe the new *Build Back Better* bill with tax restructuring for the top 1% will help, if Kyrsten Sinema doesn't Scotch it.

Way back in 1999. Pope John Paul II met with the Catholic bishops of North and South America in Mexico City, where he surprised none of them by urging them to care for the poor. But he surprised quite a few of them by also calling them to minister to the rich. "Love for the poor must be preferential, but not exclusive," the Pope said in his apostolic exhortation.

While he did not put it this bluntly, he was warning church leaders that if they continued to villainize the rich in their teaching and preaching, they were going to drive those people out of the church of Christ and into the church of unbridled capitalism where their wealth and success will receive a much warmer welcome, because, as I said, in the churches that preach a wealth ethic, to be rich means you have done something right, not wrong.

So Pope John Paul's words were timely in the midst of the boom years, and offered some balance to an issue that goes easily out of kilter. Referring to the truths in Jesus' teaching about money, Rev. James Forbes once said, "Nobody gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor." Simple as that. I think that says it best.

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Well, looking closely at the parable I'd be remiss to ignore the potent lever Jesus uses to drive home his point. It is not guilt about money he uses, but something much more universal: mortality. This is the “fool” part of the Parable of the Rich Fool.

“This very night your life is being demanded of you,” the narrator in the parable says, “and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Kind of pointed, isn't it?”

The fellow with the barns had not thought about that. Perhaps he thought of his riches as a hedge against death, who knows? I suppose that's a danger when it comes to accumulation of anything. Do we still think that way?

I ask this because the topic of mortality has become an accepted part of every day discussion. It didn't used to be, but it is now. The term, “bucket list” is now in the dictionary. People talk about it a lot.

Here's a top ten list of things in the bucket lists of Americans today.

Swim with the dolphins
Live abroad half the year
Hang out in a vineyard under the Tuscan sun
See the northern lights
Take a road trip through every state
Ride in a hot air balloon in Turkey
Swim in every ocean
See the pyramids
Go on an African Safari

And for the super-rich ... ride a rocket

Jesus says, “Be careful how you plan out your life; you have no idea when it will end.” There is similar wisdom in the following verses from the New Testament letter of *James*, which goes like this:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.” Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.” James 4:13-15

Still, I think our bucket lists can be important for what they communicate to us about life itself – why? Because they stretch us. Things like sky diving can put us in vulnerable places, places out of our comfort zones where by facing down our fears we have the greatest opportunity to grow and to change.

A woman named Robyn Ringer had something pretty simple on her bucket list. Spend a weekend in Manhattan, a place she had never been but always wanted to go. Well, she did it, with a friend a few years ago.

While she was there she met the actor, Al Pacino, pretty much by accident. Here is the text of a letter she wrote to him about that visit.

Dear Mr. Pacino,

Feb. 15, 2003

You walked into Joe Allen’s Cafe moving faster through a restaurant than anyone I had ever seen. Your fast stride made me notice you. Your oversized black coat also made me look. I knew right away that you were wearing the same coat that enveloped you on the beach in the movie, *The Insider*.

Your eyes stared intensely yet appeared not to see anything. Was it really you? I asked the waitress, “Isn’t that Al Pacino?”

“I’m not supposed to say, but it is.”

“Sue,” I said to my sister-in-law. “Get up. Leave your stuff. C’mon, let’s go.”

I don't know why I felt the urge to hurry. It was instinctual, kind of like an adrenaline reaction.

As we approached your table, Mr. Pacino, I became painfully aware that you were not only a celebrity, but a man, like any other man and that I had made a terrible mistake. When you saw us striding toward you, your head jerked to the side and your face grimaced as if you were in pain.

Despite what I interpreted as your anguish, it was too late to turn back. We were already standing at your table and I had already thrust a used cocktail napkin and pen at you, which you seemed to accept automatically.

"Mr. Pacino," I said, "we just wanted to tell you . . . how much . . . we have enjoyed your movies . . ."

"We don't get out much," Sue said, trying to explain our behavior.

When the corners of your mouth turned up in a perfunctory half-smile and you looked like you might vomit, I tried to take the napkin back.

"Oh, please, Mr. Pacino," I begged. "You don't have to sign that -- really! Really. PLEASE DON'T SIGN IT. We just wanted to tell you that we are great fans . . ."

For the first time our eyes made contact. You began to laugh and your whole body seemed to relax. Mine did too. You signed my battered napkin, then reached out to shake our hands – a firm, friendly handshake offered with a wide grin.

Even though I cannot read what you wrote on the cocktail napkin (hopefully it's not an obscenity) I will cherish it always because it reminds me that celebrities are human beings and that fame is only a perception.

At first we thought that nothing could be more memorable than meeting you, Mr. Pacino, but we were wrong. There were many memorable moments during this rare visit to New York City.

A man died in the sidewalk in front of our eyes. Minutes earlier he had been laughing at a table next to ours at Charley O's restaurant. But on the way to the theater, we passed his body on the sidewalk. People just walked by as two men pumped on his chest.

His blond companion stamped her spiky black heels on the sidewalk repeating, "Cmon, c'mon." But he continued to lie there unresponsive.

We went on to Edward Albee's play, *The Goat*, about a man who was having an affair with a goat named Sylvia. The wife, played brilliantly by Sally Field, spent much of the play enraged, breaking dishes and vases and talking and yelling about love and hurt and pain and how could he be having an affair with a goat. The story stunned us with grief and hysterical laughter and we craved a chance to read or hear the lines again.

Okay, I'll admit it. I spent \$195 on a black velvet scarf with red, green, and gold flowers that change colors with the light. I've never bought anything so extravagant before, but hey, it was New York, City and it was from Saks.

I saw my best friend from law school who has breast cancer and no hair. I got to wrap my arms around her and hug her like I've wanted to everyday since she started chemo.

I returned home to my husband and daughter who I am rarely away from. Getting home was the best part of the trip.

So, Mr. Pacino, I just wanted to tell you that I understand now what Anna Scott was trying to tell Will, in the movie, *Notting Hill* when she said, "The fame thing isn't real, ya know?" Life and death are real. Love is real. New York City is real. And you are real.

It was nice meeting you.

Sincerely,
Robin Ringer

Amen