

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday After Pentecost: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

The Rev. Brooks Cato

When I was a kid, there was this cartoon about Scrooge McDuck - Donald Duck's exorbitantly wealthy uncle. And that wealthy uncle had an estimated net worth (in the cartoon world, I'll grant you) of 44 billion duck bucks. There's a scene etched in my memory of Scrooge McDuck wearing an old-timey one-piece swimsuit diving into a swimming pool of gold coins. I know, it's a cartoon. That's not real life. But hang on a second, because while good ol' Scrooge McDuck is a cartoon caricature of the extremely wealthy, he ain't that far off.

Now I should say from the get-go, there are some people who give generously regardless of what they have, and sometimes the generosity of ordinary people is astounding. We are lucky at St. Thomas' to have some astounding givers, astounding givers most will never know about, astounding givers that truly reflect what it means to live into the Kingdom of God.

But I'd like to play with some numbers for a second to get a sense of scale with how big the numbers in the financial world can get or how much Scrooge McDuck's swimming pool holds. Once we get past one million, our brains just stop doing a good job of understanding differences. I mean, what's the difference between a million and a billion? As it turns out, the difference between one million and one billion is roughly one billion. And a trillion? There's no way I can actually understand that number. We might as well be swimming in Scrooge's pool, because none of these seem like they could possibly be real. So let's take a minute to think about what these numbers mean.

Imagine one second. We can all make sense of one second. We can make sense of ten seconds. By the time we get to one minute, we're already having trouble getting it exactly right, but we've got an idea of what 60 seconds feels like. Good so far? Ok, imagine one million seconds. Can't do it, right? Maybe it's more helpful this way: one million seconds equals 11 ½ days. A billion seconds? 32 years. A trillion? 32,000 years. Let's think about it another way. \$10,000 dollars in \$100 bills could fit in your pocket. It'd be a little conspicuous, but you could fit 10 grand in there. A trillion would need a football field's worth of shipping pallets stacked two high.

So, Scrooge McDuck with his 44 billion cartoon dubloons has somewhere around 1400 years of money or less than five-yards of that trillion dollar football field. Poor Scrooge, so much money but such a small fish. He wouldn't even crack the top 30 richest people on the planet today, though I suppose he'd still be the richest duck. The top of the list today are some recognizable names, people like Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk. People who have contributed greatly to the way our society works, for good and for ill, but still, people that have had enormous impact. And some of the people on the list were just lucky, winners of the birth lottery with exorbitantly wealthy grandparents.

This is nothing new. I mean, maybe those visualizations of big numbers are new, but we all know there's massive wealth disparity in the world. It's a fact of life, right? Seems it always has been, too. Our scriptures tell the stories of kings and princes and slaves and outcasts. Solomon was so wealthy his palace dripped with gold while Jesus was born in the dirt with a donkey as a babysitter. We get that. And y'all know Jesus talked about money more than anything else. He mostly talked about it as something to get rid of, especially as a final test of faith. And I gotta admit, as a preacher, I say that delicately! Jesus even has that pesky story about it being more difficult for a rich man to get into heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle. But, I actually think the wording of that passage matters quite a lot. It's not impossible for the rich to enter heaven, it's just hard. First Timothy is where we get that line "the love of money is the root of all evil." It's not "money is the root of all evil." It's the love of money. Money is just a thing that is. I suppose economists could argue about

whether or not it's a necessity, but in our world, it's just a thing that is. The fruit of our labors or the prize of our circumstance.

The problem comes when priorities get out of whack and money's valued or loved above all else. The love of money can take the place of God or relationship or empathy. But money also keeps a roof over the church's head, it feeds folks that get cast out, it clothes those that have nothing, maybe it even pays the medical bills of a patient who can't stop bleeding or a child on life-support. It can corrupt or it can save. And actually, I've fallen into the trap myself in that last phrase. Did you catch it? Money can corrupt or it can save. Money can save? What kind of preacher says that? I've gone and let our society work on me and put money where God should be. See how easy it is? How natural it sounds?

If I imagine the ideal, and again, I have no background in finance, but if I imagine the ideal as imagined in scripture, I'm not sure it looks like getting rid of money altogether. The community of believers in Acts "held all things in common," but they still had to interact with the rest of the world on the world's terms. I guess I'd imagine a situation where there are some people who have more and some who have less, but no one without food on their plate, and no one with an extra jet laying around. I don't imagine swimming pools full of coins, but I also don't imagine long lines at food banks. When Paul is trying to do his fundraising with the Corinthians to plant a church down in Jerusalem, he says: "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." Back in Exodus, where this quote came from, they're talking about gathering up manna in the wilderness. The people were starving and God saved them by sending bread from heaven every day. And when they gathered it, some got more than others, but those who gathered much didn't get too much and those who gathered little didn't get too little. And no one could hoard extra to curry favor or gain power or barter from a place of strength. There was, simply put, enough. Enough so that no one needed to live in fear of how much the next price increase would move insulin out of reach. Enough so that no one who needed a place to stay would get priced out of their 30-year home. Enough so that no one had to work an extra job because their pension got tanked by predatory investors.

You know, when I think about Scrooge McBezos or whoever's on their way to becoming the world's first trillionaire, I gotta wonder, sure they've had a big impact, but is their impact proportionally as important to our world as their wealth might reflect? Think about it another way: my mother worked as a teacher for 28 years, making about \$30,000 a year by the time she retired. If she could've saved every nickel and counted before taxes, she still never would've broken the million-dollar threshold. Is the creator of Amazon really worth 2,300 times more than a teacher? You could do this over and over, and if your brain and your heart are anything like mine, the more you try to justify a single person having a billion dollars or more, the more the cracks begin to show. It would seem as though those who have much have too much. But there's a sneaky thing that some of those billionaires do to appear generous. They'll give a charity a million dollars and make a show of it. Now, I'm not one to make a show, first of all, but more importantly, let's look at what a big gift means to Jeff Bezos, who was lauded right before covid for giving \$10 million to climate change efforts. That's a lot of money. Don't get me wrong, if someone wants to give St. T's \$10 million, I suppose I'd take it! But should we let that gift wow us? \$10 million dollars is 0.005% of his \$200 billion net worth. Put differently, if my mom after 28 years of teaching and before taxes made a gift at the same 0.005% rate she would've donated a whopping \$42. That's not even a trip to the grocery store.

I've heard it said that it is fundamentally immoral to be a billionaire. Now, I've read enough Rand and grown up with enough capitalists to feel my hackles stand up with a claim like that. But if billionaires exist while so many others suffer, if one duck can swim in gold while others starve, there's a major systemic problem, and it just might be sin. If those who have too little have too little because there are some who have too much, then yes, it's immoral. And if there's something that can be done to help those who have too little, then yes, it

absolutely must be done. It is hard for a rich man to enter heaven because letting go of great wealth and all that comes with it is hard. But there is great reward in heaven for those who care for their fellow man, regardless of their status, especially because of their status, especially if their fellow man is stomped down by a system that pushes them further and further into fear and economic uncertainty. This has real consequences: in our world, the single greatest indicator of life expectancy is wealth - the top 1% live as much as 14 years longer than the bottom 1% and roughly 9 years longer than the average earner.

Now I'm no economist, and I know my knowledge of money markets and capital gains and rehypothecation is greatly limited. But I am a student of scripture, and the overarching message in scripture, especially once Jesus starts calling people out for their misplaced loves, the overarching message in scripture is that we ought to love God and love our neighbor far more than anything else, even our bank accounts. It's tough stuff, I know. I am a priest who likes his creature comforts, but my desire for creature comforts can never be worth more than your need for survival. Our church is entrusted with great resources. Some of us are fortunate enough to be as well. And some of us are not. So, my prayer in our community is the same as Paul's to the Corinthians and the same as God's people in the wilderness: May the one who has much never have too much, and the one who has little never have too little.