

When the painters finished last week, they came into the office to say their goodbyes. And before they left, somehow or other the lottery came up. We decided that if any of us won, we'd start by giving St. Thomas' a chunk, of course. Then what? Well, with all that money, surely we could do some great things, save the world, feed the children, teach the rich how to pay their taxes. I wish that's what we'd done with our new-found wealth. But painters and priest alike agreed that the best thing would be to buy enough land that we couldn't see our neighbors. The only neighbors I want to see are deer and foxes, so long as they stay out of my garden and leave my layin' hens alone. I'm sure if I had oodles of cash, I'd make lots of donations. Set up some endowments, a couple of college funds, maybe a dog bed made from only the finest silks for the canine connoisseur. I'd do all that, but it wouldn't be long before I'd set up a hermit's life puttering around in flowy robes and a beard long enough I'd step on it. A wizard, that's what I'm saying. If I won the lottery I'd turn into a wizard.

A very quick and very important sidebar: did you know that in the 1700s, landowners had so much money they'd decorate their massive estates with useless buildings called follies. Then to really sell the whimsy they'd hire a guy whose entire job was being a live-in hermit. They'd cover all his expenses, feed him and everything, and his entire job was to live out there and be kooky. All that to say, if this priesting gig doesn't work out, I've got a back-up plan. I don't think I'd hire an ornamental hermit mostly 'cause I want to be the ornamental hermit. But if I did win the lottery, it strikes me how quickly my mind went to getting away from people and going it alone, or at least alone with just my household. Escape. Solitude. Hand-scrawled no-trespassing signs and an ominously spooky path through woods you'd be better served pretending like you never saw. Maybe it's my hillbilly roots or maybe it's rugged individualism. But I wonder. Seems like a mighty tall ask to love my neighbor while avoiding having neighbors.

As our reach expands and our world shrinks, the concept of neighbor's shifting. Who is my neighbor? Definitely the folks right next door, the folks on my street, the folks that live just around the corner or across my backyard. Hamilton's small enough we might all be neighbors. But what about the people in Florida? Our neighbors down there sure need some help. But if Floridians can be neighbors, who else? Ukrainians? Russians? South Sudanese? Who is my neighbor? Turns out, the word comes from Old English. It literally means "near-peasant," a peasant that lives nearby. "Nearby" is a squishy term these days. It can be physically close or sorta philosophically close. Like, I'm closer to the queer couple across town than the political flag waving house down the street. But it's the other part that really matters to me today, the "peasant" part of "near-peasant" neighbor. Who is my neighbor? On a global scale, it's tough to think of the poorest of the poor and me and folks the next tax bracket up all on the same team. Most of the time, we don't act like it, but I think we are. There's a huge difference between those who live under the poverty line and those with a house on the lake, of course there is. But pretty much everyone feels it when the cost of eggs goes up. But there are some that don't feel it at all. Gas gets more expensive, milk doubles in price, lumber skyrockets, and a tiny handful don't even blink.

Let me put it this way. If you take the median household income in Hamilton and figure what kind of impact buying one can of coke has, it's not much, right? Turns out to be .002% of our average yearly paycheck. But if you take that same percentage out of a single, measly billion dollars, the equivalent impact could buy you a pair of brand new ultralight aircraft so you can look down on all the plebs walking to work. The richest person in the world has 253 times that. 81 people, that's a little less than two Sundays' worth of St. Thomas' services, 81 people own half of the entire world's wealth.

I'm not trying to say that if you're not a billionaire, you're a peasant. I know a million dollars is more than \$15 an hour. But we've been taught to think that the differences between poverty and living wage and middle class and all those grades of difference mean everything. And while that is different, a billionaire's an entirely different universe. A million bucks is a lot. But a billionaire could misplace a cool million and still basically have a billion dollars leftover. I'm not sure I'm doing a good job of explaining just how different the two are. Let's try this. A million golf balls could fill my bedroom; a billion could fill Grand Central Station. A person with one billion dollars could survive at the current average cost of living for 32,000 years. If you saved \$1,000 for every minute since Jesus Christ was born, you'd just barely qualify for the billionaire's club. That's how long it would take. A billion's a lot. That's the kind of wealth I'm talking about, and again, I don't want to make it sound like if we're under that nine-zero threshold, we're all the same or all poor. But I do want to stress just how far beyond our comprehension that much money is. A person could live 32,000 years off a billion dollars, while some can't even make it a single month on what they've got. It's not just, and it's not faithful. And it certainly doesn't show us how to love our neighbors.

I'm fairly certain being a billionaire is a sin. Now, here me out. I don't mean all billionaires break the Ten Commandments or whatever, but those things we do that benefit solely ourselves while taking away from others, that's sinful. For example, since the pandemic began, the wealthiest people in the world have seen their collective net worth go up by 12%. Any guesses how much the collective net worth of the poorest 50% went down by in the same period? You guessed it. 12%. Some are calling the pandemic "the greatest transfer of wealth in human history," and it's going to those that've already got plenty.

I still feel like we're missing something, so let's come at it another way. The Hebrew people God and Moses are about to set free are slaves under the exploitative wealth of the Egyptians, and as they tell ya how to eat the lamb at the Passover, if your neighbor doesn't have enough, they tell you to share it with them. One of the prophets says that Jeruslaem will fall because the wealthy have too many homes while the poor languish in the streets. Another says the wealthy grind the poor into the dirt. Another says they take food right out of the mouths of the poor. Paul says stealing and coveting only lead to trouble. And Jesus says the love of money is the root of all evil.

We don't even need incomprehensible numbers to get this. Deep down, we know it ain't right for some to have so little while others have so much. And our scriptures repeat that over and over and over again. We know that, and still we have trouble figuring out which neighbors to love. The wealthy need love and guidance and grace as much as anyone, but thinking back to that early idea of "neighbor" as a peasant that lives nearby, well that sorta redirects my attention. Who is my neighbor? Well, it's y'all, for starters. But it's also the person who occasionally sleeps in the Parish Hall. It's Dawn, who needed a ride to Binghamton after a long stay in the hospital. It's Donnie and Fred down in Little Rock. It's the kid trying to find their footing after getting evicted for being gay. It's the woman whose husband ran off and left her with all the responsibilities of kids in school, a mortgage, and credit cards to pay off. Something nasty's happened in our world that makes us idolize the billionaires and demonize anyone below us. I guess if we demonize them, maybe we don't have to help them, and if we don't have to help them, we can ignore them, and if we ignore them, well, they're off the radar, and good riddance. It makes me wonder, do we look up because we long to be wealthy? And do we avoid looking down 'cause we don't want to see how much closer we are to the poor?

There's a church down in Arkansas that does an annual burial for those who didn't have the resources to get buried otherwise. This church, they bury about a dozen or twenty every year all at the same time. On the bottom of the ladder, ignored even to their deaths, perceived as as much a nuisance as in life, but that church honors them, refuses to let them be forgotten, and puts them right next to all the other folks from the church. Neighbors, at least at the end. It's a great thing for a church to do, but it never should've gotten to that point. It's

beautiful that they're equal in death, but why did it take death to bring equality about? Why couldn't it've come sooner? The thing is, it can, we just gotta make it so.

Y'all, when Jesus puts us to work, even to call out each other's missteps, he's putting us to work to serve each other. That works beautifully, but it means we've gotta serve everyone. Paul says "love your neighbor," love your nearby peasants, love everyone, sure, but focus in on those that need it the most. So, whether you win the lottery or keep on living life as it is, remember the core of who we are: Love God and love your neighbor. And don't wait. Love 'em now.