

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

The Poverty of Riches

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Scripture Luke 12: 15-22 and Luke 5-15

Happy Australia Day! The residents of Perth, West Australia are falling into their beds—it's a little after 2am there—following an evening of festivities to celebrate the 1788 raising of the Union Jack near Sydney Cove. One year from today, I intend to be standing on the south shore of Western Australia's Swan River watching Perth's Skyworks show and reflecting on the achievements of that country since its founding. Since it is my course, I will be forced to consider the Australia Day celebrations not only from the settler perspective, but also from the Aboriginal perspective. As you might suspect, Australia Day looks different through native eyes. It—at least in part—looks like a celebration of conquest and genocide. It wouldn't be a very good course if we examined Australia only through western European and Southeast Asian eyes.

Seeing through the eyes of another is one of the educational advantages of travel. It almost makes up for the huge expense, lack of sleep, uncomfortable seats, and the discomfort of my stomach—really my entire being—when I'm foolish enough to look out the window while the airplane is tilting or turning. Still, to be an educated person requires that we see multiple perspectives regardless of crummies in tummies. Cross-cultural

travel is one approach to seeing the world through the eyes of another in concrete and irreversible ways.

One of the most eye-opening places I ever been and to which I will soon return is Nicaragua. It is a country where the metaphorical scales simply fall from one's eyes. As you might expect, this hurts quite a bit. However, once you get used to it, you start to see more clearly. Cari Skogberg and I are teaching a one credit hour course on Nicaragua this coming term and the class will be traveling to Nicaragua over Spring Break and spending time with *Iglesia Luterana de Nicaragua 'Fe Y Esperanza'* the Nicaraguan Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope. (We may have a couple of open spots, but if you would like to go, talk to me after Chapel. I need to buy airline tickets today or tomorrow.)

Nicaragua regularly competes for the title of poorest country in the hemisphere and usually comes in second just behind Haiti. In 2002, Nicaragua had a GDP per capita of about \$2,200 (purchasing power parity). In contrast, the U.S. had a GDP per capita of \$36,300 or about 16-and-a-half times higher. Of course, that really understates the real inequality between the two countries. Since Nicaragua's distribution of income is so unequal, the poor in Nicaragua are far poorer than this ratio suggests.

One lesson I learned in Nicaragua is that when God preaches good news to the poor, he's not bringing good news to me. Given that we're all here at this expensive, private, Lutheran College Chapel, I suspect that the good news for the poor is also not directed at us. There is in fact bad news when God tells us about the poverty of riches. Today's two readings are addressed

to all of us. Your riches—my riches—are a stumbling block to eternal happiness. In fact, through the eyes of a typical Nicaraguan, who gets by on a dollar or two a day, wealthy American Christians must be a sight to behold. We likely look like the Rich Fool with his barns in our approach to trusting that our wealth gives us good reason to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.”

As both of our readings directly tell us today, riches are dangerous. It's useful to back up one verse in the parable of the rich fool to examine Jesus' motivation for telling the story in the first place. Luke 12:13-14 says, “Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Jesus replies by saying, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” Jesus can see that this man is obsessed with wealth. He doesn't come to Jesus seeking communion with God, or transcendent peace, or The Way to eternal bliss. He asks God to settle a dispute over wealth that he wants to deny his brother. That is the thing about private property, if I have it, you don't. One of the dangers of wealth for this man was to put him at odds with his brother. As some of us know too well, there's nothing like a battle over inheritance to pull a family apart.

So, we learn at least two lessons from this parable. Wealth and the pursuit of more of it has the potential to 1) divide us from our family and 2) to seduce us into trusting it instead of God as the source of our true happiness. Since we fail to find true happiness, we go back to the mall and try shopping again hoping that the next time will yield the pleasure we initially sought. If not the mall, perhaps it is to the stock exchange, or the liquor store, or the video lottery machine, or to the iTunes site to buy yet one more album.

Since the purchasing fail to generate deep satisfaction and since we are always comparing ourselves to someone with more, our drive toward further consumption is assured and deep satisfaction denied.

Let's take a closer look at the second the readings, the parable of the sower through Nicaraguan eyes. I suspect that this parable is not new to any of us in this room. However, let's take a closer look at Luke 8:14 as if we were poor. "As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares **AND RICHES AND PLEASURES** of life, and their fruit does not mature." Did you hear that part about the riches and pleasures of life? From the Nicaraguan perspective, if there is any justice in the world, the good news is that at least if we are poor, we don't have those thorns of riches and pleasures" creeping up and choking out our faith. And in case we failed to get the message the first time, Matthew 13:18-23 and Mark 4:13-20 replay the same story with perhaps even clearer language. In Mark, "the cares of the world, and **lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in** and choke the word and it yields nothing." In the Book of Matthew similarly, "the cares of the world and the **lure of wealth choke the word**, and it yields nothing."

So, from the first reading we learn that wealth divides us from our family and it seduces us into false trust in material things. From the parable of the sower, we learn that the riches and pleasures of life and/or the lure of wealth divide us from God by stifling our faith.

In other passages, we have heard that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to get to heaven. We've heard that

the love of money is the source of all evil. According to one scholar, the reference to greed or covetousness appears 19 times in the New Testament alone. I'm beginning to think that God means it when he warns us of the poverty of riches.

However, as bad as these other three problems are—dividing us from family, seducing us from God, and choking our faith—the worst problem with wealth is that it hardens our hearts. As a country, we have become seduced by the allure of wealth. Back in the 1970s, we pledged to increase our annual giving for foreign aid to .7% of our GDP. Since then, our aid has declined. As our wealth has increased, we have become increasingly separated from our brothers and sisters. We currently give about .10% of GDP or about one-half of one percent of our federal government spending. At the same time, we know that three billion people live on less than \$2 per day. About 1.3 billion people get by on less than \$1 per day. According to UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund), about 30,000 children under the age of 5 die every day—every day—of preventable diseases and hunger (<http://www.unicef.org/ffl/text/factsforlife-en.txt>). To put that into perspective, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks killed 2,749 according to the latest tallies. World wide preventable deaths are like 10 or 11 September 11ths except that 1) it happens every day and 2) all of the victims are under the age of five.

The good news is that according to the late James P. Grant, director of UNICEF—and quoted by Arthur Simon's in his book *How Much is Enough?* for \$500, an organization like UNICEF can save a life. According to the organization's own web site, \$500 would provide Vitamin A capsules

to 8,300 children to protect them from blindness and improve their overall health for one year. That sounds like the kind of expenditure that yields satisfaction and is consistent with our desire to spend. \$500 for a life. Then again, you could buy a really big TV or perhaps pay for an expensive study abroad experience and begin to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.”

Peace.

MORNING WORSHIP
Monday, Jan. 26, 2004

Prelude

“You Are the Seed”

Welcome/announcements

Invocation

Opening Litany

L: God you promised that the first are last and least are the greatest

C: Open us, O God, to your mystery

L: You blessed those who mourn and entrusted the earth to the meek

C: Open us, O God, to your mystery

L: You fill the hungry and scatter the proud in their own vain
imagination

C: Open us, O God, to your mystery

L: Help us this day to know the riches of poverty and the poverty of
riches

C: Open us, O God, to your mystery

Prayer

HYMN

“Albare’ ”

WOV 971

Scripture

Luke 12: 15-22; Luke 8: 5-15

Sermon “The Poverty of Riches”

Professor Reynold Nesiba

Nicaragua

HYMN

“You Are the Seed”

WOV 753, vv. 1-2

Prayers & Lord’s Prayer

Benediction

Postlude

“Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ”