Sunday, October 12, 1997
THE PERILS OF WEALTH
Mark 10:17-27

During the 40 years of my ministry, many people have come to me, as I'm sure they have to other ministers, and said something like this: "I am in desperate trouble, and I need the help of God." The troubles have been of every kind.

Here's someone who has lost her job or another person who has been diagnosed with cancer. A marriage of 15 years is now ready to break apart, or parents have come to talk about a child gone wrong. I could go on and on with more specific examples of trouble. These people are, as Jesus said, "weary and heavy laden," and I'm pleased they have come to the church for help.

However, never in these 40 years has someone come to me and said, "I am living the good life. I have more money than I need. I am in good health, have a wonderful marriage, my children are grown and responsible. I need the help of God to deal with my good fortune. Please pray for me."

You may be thinking, "The reason that no one of that description has ever come to ask for the guidance of God is because there are no people in our world who are living the good life on easy street." And I would answer, "To be sure, there are few people, if any, for whom life is devoid of any kind of trouble or problems. Yet there are certain individuals who have no overwhelming defeat in their lives, no bitter disappointments, and for whom life has been all in all quite smooth. There are many people in our communities and in this congregation who overall have had good fortune, some of whom have inherited large sums of money or who have been lucky."

Why is it then that such individuals have not come to say, "I need the help of God to deal with my good fortune?" The reason, I suspect, is that for most of us when life is good, when we are living on easy street, we come to think that the Christian faith has little to say to us. We don't need the help of God to handle our good fortune. We can handle it quite well ourselves, thank you.

Statistically, it has been well-documented over the years that in good times in a country like ours, church attendance tends to drop, whereas in bad times, it rises. Along the same line, in the most prosperous economic times, people give a smaller proportion of their income to churches, and in times of economic recession or depression, they give a larger percentage of their incomes. It doesn't seem logical.

The same is true for individuals as it is for society as a whole. Those who are the most prosperous, who are the most fortunate and have the highest incomes, give the smallest percentage of their income to the church. Whereas those individuals who have lower incomes give a much larger percentage of their income, in spite of the fact that the Bible teaches the joy of proportionate giving.

Isn't it true for many of us that when we're living the good life, we tend to put our Christian faith on the sidelines? It becomes another leisure-time activity, something we do when we have nothing else on the agenda. The worship of God becomes less important to us because we have other gods we are worshiping.

Yet there are those among us, and some of you listening to this sermon might be in that category, who, in the midst of living the good life, sense that something is missing. I believe that was the case of the man who came to Jesus one day, knelt before him, and asked, “What must I do to have a more authentic life?”

The perils of poverty are well-documented. Malnutrition and starvation kill 35,000 children every day. Forty million people die every year from poverty’s perils — the lack of food, shelter, health, education, and hope.

What we forget is that wealth, riches, the good life, prosperity, also have their dangers, although they are not as obvious.

This man who came to Jesus was accustomed to paying the necessary price to achieve his goals. Therefore, he assumed that he could attain or purchase the quality of life taught and lived by Jesus. To him, life was an achievement, a prize to win, a commodity to be bought. That is a familiar affirmation of faith. It is our society’s dominant creed.

It is no accident that the Bible contains more warnings about the dangers of wealth than about the pitfalls of poverty. Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to know God’s realm,” or as I prefer to translate it, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to experience and accept the grace of God.” Even if one allows for hyperbole, that is still a stark assessment of the perils of wealth.

Let’s examine some of these perils in more detail.

One peril is a false sense of security, self-assurance, and self-sufficiency. Having abundant resources can lead to the assumption that whatever needs to be done, we can do it. Whatever we need, we can buy it. With enough money, or education, or ability, or goodness, we will be able to secure our own future. With larger barns or investments, we will be able to relax. We will be somebody.

But self-sufficiency and self-produced security can cut us off from grace. Life becomes an achievement earned or a commodity purchased rather than a gift gratefully received and shared with others. God can become unnecessary, or simply another commodity to be used for personal ends. What we own and what we possess become intertwined with our identity. We become what we own, know, or produce. Riches become gods and the foundation of our identity and security.

That’s why our Christian faith says that we need God more in good times, when we are on easy street, than when we are in trouble.

A second peril of wealth is that we can be living in a fool’s paradise because it’s so easy to believe that good fortune is ours because we deserve it or that we have earned it; therefore, God has especially blessed us because we are so good, whereas those who have less than we do, who have more bad fortune, do not deserve any better.

Someone once said, “Both sides of easy street are lined with buildings that have false, fake romantic fronts that conceal the real nature of existence, and it is all too easy for us who live on easy street to be deceived into believing that we are in charge; that life, after all, is easy if

you know the tricks of the trade; that money can do anything and everything, and that easy street is the way to happiness."

My friends, when we are in that condition and begin to entertain that kind of thinking, we are in the greatest danger of all.

The stories in the Bible and the teachings of Jesus remind us over and over again that ultimately, God is in charge, not us. All that we have is a gift from God. In the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy quotes God as declaring, "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the power to get wealth." In the New Testament, Jesus calls a man who is living the good life on easy street a fool because he forgets that God has given him everything he has.

A third peril of wealth is that we tend to forget that Jesus said, "The more you have, the more is required of you." Those who have more have a bigger responsibility to manage it in a proper, responsible fashion. Those who have more are expected to give more. The danger is the more we have, the more stingy we become.

A fourth peril of wealth is that it can cause us to lose our souls. Jesus said, "What does it profit us if we gain the whole world and lose our own souls?" And in the story from the gospel of Mark about the rich man coming to Jesus, he said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to experience the grace of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to know God's grace." Most of us exclude ourselves from that category, of course, because we do not think of ourselves as being rich. Yet according to God's standard, most of us are.

It is difficult for the prosperous to enter the new life God offers because prosperity can change our priorities. If our security and worth are rooted in our achievements and our possessions and in our status, achieving more and maintaining and increasing what we have becomes our driving motivation. We can't let up. We can't relax. We can't give cheerfully. To do so threatens our security and sense of worth.

Possessions can become addictive. The more we have, the more we are afraid we won't have enough, and this inhibits our giving. Jesus sensed this addiction in the rich man who came to him. This man could not understand life as grace — as a gift to be given away, a gift available without price. This threatened his way of living. That's why Jesus told this young man to give away what he owned. And this young man went away grieving. He did not understand that because all is a gift, there is no entitlement.

We know the feeling. Luxuries become necessities. As one who remembers life when I was growing up without central heating, running hot water, television, VCRs, and microwaves, I know how easily things once considered the luxuries of the few become necessities for the masses. I know how difficult it is to distinguish between needs and desires.

A fifth peril of wealth is that we can become too comfortable, and this carries with it the danger of moral flabbiness. There's a lot of that around in our time. Adversity has a way of bringing its own discipline. We do not like it when we are struck down with disease or have some other kind of serious trouble in our lives, yet that experience can bring its own discipline. It can have a cleansing value. It can help refine our moral and spiritual fiber.

Prosperity, on the other hand, can make it appear that we do not need any discipline at all because we are doing so well. The danger of prosperity is that it can begin to appear to us that the easy thing is the natural thing, and the natural thing is the right thing. So we begin on a downward path toward moral degeneration. It's happening in our society right now over and over again.

Day after day, in this secular civilization, with all of its exaggerated emphasis on image, materialism, and consuming, we are tempted more and more to believe that the easy way is the right way. We are lured by invitations to "easy" credit and "easy" payments. Easy, easy, easy! Deferred gratification is considered bad.

The antidote to this kind of wrong thinking is the daily discipline of our Christian faith, which, if we pay attention to it, reminds us that the easy way is not always the right way. I believe that we who know some form of prosperity, and that includes most of us, need to be reminded of God's grace more than those who are not prosperous.

That's one reason I talk so much about the importance of regular church attendance in worship. Churches like this one are spiritual feeding stations, and those of us who live the good life need to be here regularly for spiritual nourishment. Sure, you can take the easy way out and say that you can meet God on the golf course, or by taking a nature walk, or maybe even by sleeping late and then sitting on the deck and reading the Sunday paper while you have your Sunday morning coffee.

But it is unlikely that the God you encounter at any of these places will call your life to account or challenge your ethics or renew your moral foundation. It is unlikely that in one of these places you will hear God say: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?"

There is yet another thing that needs to be said to those of us who have experienced some prosperity. If you want to have a vital, sustaining faith in God so that when trouble comes, the time to begin to build that faith is when you are living in good times. Too many people mistakenly believe that they can have a strong religious faith on a part-time basis and that they can get it quickly full-time should that become necessary. Spiritual strength, like physical strength or physical health, cannot be obtained immediately on demand.

As I conclude, let me mention again the perils of wealth according to our faith:

The first peril is a false sense of security.

The second peril is that you come to believe good fortune is yours because you deserve it, and you are therefore better than those who are not as prosperous as you are.

The third peril is that you tend to forget the more you have, the more there is that is required of you.

The fourth peril is that wealth can cause you to lose your soul because possessions can become addictive, and you become stingy.

The fifth peril is moral flabbiness.

The way to deal with these perils is to build a life-sustaining faith and, in so doing, become a grateful, generous, joyful, giving person. God will never reject you because you are prosperous. God only wants you to remember that life is not in what you own or possess — life is in God's grace. It is this grace that gives you identity and worth. Amen.