

One of my favorite stories of all time is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. It's a great story, and it's one that is deservedly popular. I even preached a 4-week sermon series on it back in Advent of 2012. In a couple of months, I'm sure that we'll all have the chance to catch it in one of its many incarnations as Christmas approaches.

But one of the most disturbing and memorable images in *A Christmas Carol* is the ghost of Jacob Marley. Marley is weighed down by ponderous heavy chains, symbolizing the way he treated his wealth. As Dickens describes it, "(The chain) was long, and wound about him like a tail, and it was made... of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel."

The image of that chain and of Marley's ghost is one of the most powerful images of the misuse of wealth, of poor stewardship of money. The chain weighs Marley down. It binds him. It restricts his movement. And Marley put the chain on of his own free will. Instead of owning possessions, Marley let his possessions own him.

As Americans, we are the richest and most powerful people in the history of the world. Average Americans are wealthy, far beyond the dreams of most people in the world. In fact, if your gross income is \$33,000 a year or more, then you're richer than 99% of the world's population.¹ We complain about taxes, and we struggle to make ends meet, we have bills that pile up. But we must never forget, that in the eyes of the rest world, we're the upper crust. We're the top 1%. We're rich. And all of us need to listen closely to what today's scripture readings are saying.

In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Amos has a warning for the rich. Alas, he says, for those who have wealth, who can afford to eat lambs and calves, who have so much that they drink wine by the bowlful instead of the glassful, who lounge on their couches and ivory beds.

Not alas, because they do these things, but alas because they do these things and have not cared about the ruin of Joseph. In plain terms, alas because they do these things and they don't care about what is happening to God's people. Alas because they fill their own appetites, but don't care about others.

Our Gospel has the same message. Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus says, 'There was a rich man. He dressed in fancy clothes. He ate big feasts every day. Outside his front door, at his gate, there was this poor guy named Lazarus. He was covered with sores. He was hungry, and he just dreamed about getting a hold of the scraps that fell onto the rich man's floor. And he was in such bad shape that the dogs would come and lick his sores.' Blech.

Now, notice what Jesus doesn't say. Jesus doesn't say that the rich man was a bad man and that Lazarus was a good man. All Jesus says is that the rich man feasted sumptuously while the poor man lay at his gate, hungry and covered with sores. The rich man's problem is that he ignores the problems right outside his front door.

¹ www.globalrichlist.com

The message is that you can't just ignore those in need, especially those who are right outside your front door.

After all, it's all too easy for us to lock our front doors. It's all too easy for us to climb into our little cocoons. It's all too easy for us to ignore the needs of the poor all around us.

Yet our Lord Jesus Christ commands us to do something different: to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to bring the Good News to the poor. That's a part of the deal: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.

As Middle class Americans, we have been blessed with incredible wealth and riches. But with that material success comes great responsibilities. Our Epistle lesson from 1 Timothy says it nicely. Those who are rich (and that means us), those who have been blessed with possessions are "to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

As good stewards of all the riches God has given us, those of us who have are called to help with those who are less fortunate. We are called to help with our time, help with our talent, and help with our treasure.

At St. Paul's we are involved in several outreach ministries. We're asking a few folks to spend a minute or two each this morning to share with us about those ministries.

****(remainder of the sermon devoted to lay people sharing about our outreach ministries)****