

In common

Proverbs 22:2

September 6, 2015

It doesn't take many words to make a telling point. How about ten?

*Come down off the cross,
we can use the wood.*

Did you hear John sing those words? One of my favorite musicians, Sarah Jarosz, recorded this song, and from the first time I heard it, I have been struck by these two lines:

*Come down off the cross,
we can use the wood.*

Meaning? Let go of self-pity. Don't be a martyr. Don't get "stuck" by your own choice in an endless cycle of pain and unhappiness. You can get down! Come down off the cross. You don't need to be there.

And we can use the wood! The resources at your disposal -- what you have and who you are -- can be put to better use. It's a practical matter. It is healthier and happier, not just for you, but for all of us if you get down. We need what you have to offer to the human community. We need you.

It doesn't take many words to make a telling point. How about fourteen?

The rich and the poor have this in common ...

Wait, stop!

But I'm not finished, that's only nine words.

I said, "Stop!" The rich and the poor have nothing in common. They live in entirely different worlds. Take Sharon for example, Sharon Dory from Mendocino County, California. She says,

For seven years, I lived on \$500 a month. The cost of taxes on my small home was more than \$200 monthly. Volunteering was the only "recreation" I could afford. I feel rich when I have food. (from 'I feel rich when I have food.' Stories from the War on Poverty, by Dominica Lim)

“I feel rich when I have food?” Does Sharon live in the same world as say, Bill Gates? Does she live in the same world as you?
Or do you live in the same world as Tania Parsons?

I'm a single mom and I make under \$11,000 a year. The only way to do well for us is with food stamps. Without it, we couldn't eat. The government reduced the amount we get so by the end of the month we ran out of milk, juices, bread, eggs. It's difficult when one child is only three. They have health insurance, but I was told I don't qualify for it. In my area, rent is high and all of my income goes to it. I don't want to become homeless again. It's scary. (from 'I feel rich when I have food.' Stories from the War on Poverty, by Dominica Lim)

Do you live with a constant fear of becoming homeless? Again?

We're not the same. Education, opportunity, recreation, quality of life, hopes, dreams -- all of it is different, not just income. I have always believed that the gap between rich and poor is not a simple economic equation. There is a “poverty complex” and a corresponding “wealth complex.” Who I am in the world and how I see my place in the world -- socially, culturally, politically, psychologically, even spiritually -- is shaped by my economic circumstances.

I found an article this week that makes this same point. It is entitled, *Wealth Doesn't Make the Rich Happier, But Poverty Makes the Poor Sadder*. Author Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig quotes research that finds

“no trace of a relationship between income and happiness ... [instead] wealth may undermine people's ability to savor positive events, largely canceling out the happiness benefits of higher income.” In other words [Bruenig explains], the sheer abundance of experiences and possessions available to the rich at all times makes regular days seem dreadfully dull.

How sad for them. Yes, how sad for them!

And, on the other hand, for the poor,

the comparisons we make -- especially those that put us on the losing side -- may be unfair or unearned, but when it comes to self-image, they stick. Those feelings of inadequacy and failure persist for poor people ... [so] rather than being jealous of the material excesses of the rich, poor people seem rather ready to identify their own shortcomings -- real or imagined, fairly or unfairly acquired -- as the source of their lesser control and dignity. No wonder lower-income people feel more sadness ...

It seems the rich and the poor have this in common: they are both unhappy!

But that's not how the proverb goes.

The rich and the poor have this in common, the Lord made them both.

Not "God" made them both, a simple acknowledgement that rich and poor alike are creatures made by a creator, but "the Lord" made them both. This particular, personal God, this God who is invested in his creation, this God who loves his creatures, the Lord made them both,

Let the words seep into your consciousness. The Lord made them both ... The Lord made you ...

Say you are rich. What do these words mean?

Ike Leighty was rich and he knew what these words mean! He knew he was made by the Lord and that all he had came as a blessing from the Lord. Everything, even life itself, especially life itself, is gift. He may have had the advantage of personal experience with both sides of the equation, wealth and poverty, nevertheless, he did know that he had this in common with all people, he owed his life to the Lord. And so, out of that sense of commonality, out of that sense of communion, he shared himself freely. He shared who he was and what he had.

When we understand that the rich and the poor have this in common, pride gives way to humility, and greed give way to generosity.

Say you are poor. What do these words mean?

You have this in common, with rich people and with all people -- the Lord made you. The Lord made you! Your life is precious, supremely precious, as it is. You matter, as you are. The only difference between you and someone who has more than you is that that person has more than you, and that difference doesn't matter.

When we understand that the rich and the poor have this in common, resentment is swallowed up by humility, and bitterness gives way to gratitude.

Say you are you. What do these words mean, regardless of what you may have or not have? Do you understand that the only thing that matters is that the Lord made you?

Do not allow yourself to be trapped by shame, either because you think you have too much or because you think you have too little. Come down off the cross!

And then look around. See all those with whom you have this in common, all those with whom you are in communion, because the Lord made you both, because the Lord loves you both, because the Lord gave Jesus for the sake of both of you, because the Lord invites both of you to this table ...