

"Unimaginable Riches"

"A Charlie Brown Christmas"

Isaiah 40:6-8; Matthew 8:18-22; Revelation 2:8-11

"And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (Luke 2:8-14, KJV) His mission being completed, upon exiting the stage, Linus saith unto Charlie Brown, "This, Charlie Brown, is the real meaning of Christmas." For perhaps a reason obvious, I have to offer an apology for I could never recite these words at all like Linus in that timeless classic *A Charlie Brown Christmas*."

The famous and heart-warming recitation was in response to Charley Brown who cries out in desperation the critical question, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Commercialism has eclipsed what we know to be the true meaning of Christmas. It is Linus, carrying his security blanket, who quietly walks on stage and begins simply, "Lights, please." whereupon he quotes our beloved story from Luke's Gospel. It is perhaps often overlooked, or even goes unnoticed, that it is precisely at the moment he says "fear not" that Linus drops his security blanket. [Actually, I never noticed this but only read about it during my research.]

Some might wonder why it might be appropriate to bring this truly classic, and in some ways mostly secular, Christmas program into this sanctuary. What does Charlie Brown, Linus, and that scraggly little Christmas tree have to do with any of our Scripture lessons or emphases of the day? Please let me offer a few thoughts on the matter, beginning with a connection with the Lord's Supper.

Jesus was "rewarded" for his life of service in the name of God with a death sentence. Galatians 3:13 tells us that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (NIV) This of course is a defense of the doctrine that says Jesus died in OUR stead, that is, his death had a particular purpose. Jesus' life and death was a fulfillment of what was prophesied by Moses as memorialized in one of his last 3 farewell sermons. "If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." (Deuteronomy 21:22-23, NIV)

Lest it go unnoticed, there is a direct link between our Gospel and Epistle lessons and the central lesson from *A Charley Brown Christmas*. That link is the concept of poverty and how that relates to spiritual riches. It would seem that Jesus held no earthly possessions as such. He never even had a place to ultimately claim as home. He of course slept in various places but none that he would claim as his own in the sense of material possession. Yet, he was the richest of any to ever roam the earth. The spiritual riches he held were much the

same for which the Christians of the church of Smyrna were commended. As to Linus and the Gospel birth story, the message was that the grace of God was open to everyone who earnestly and honestly accepted and then, in the end, stood for Jesus, regardless of how wealthy or poor they were. I read the story the other day of a fellow who grew up on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum but who felt great encouragement from the message Linus conveyed from the Gospel birth story because it carried the message that the ultimate riches of life are available to the poor and underprivileged.

There is another story I wish to share.

When I served my church in Torrington, WY I couldn't help but take notice of the large wooden cross on the front wall of the sanctuary. It did not have a smooth surface as is the case with most crosses we see. It had a series of chop marks, criss-crossed all up and down the ugly thing. The original somewhat smooth surfaces had been chopped up to more accurately convey the true nature of the hideous thing, thus reminding us of its grisly history. It was a last second thing. In the instant just before it was to be erected on the front sanctuary wall the pastor called the process to a screeching halt and asked someone to get him an ax. He, the pastor, set to work as it lay on the floor, making the object lesson and reminder more representative of what it actually represented.

In some way similar, but also dissimilar, the so-called "Charlie Brown" Christmas tree bears little resemblance to virtually all Christmas trees we see today. It is a scraggly little thing; pathetic some would say. Virtually everyone laughed at Charley Brown's tree. But which is the more accurate representation? Charley Brown's tree speaks of poverty and dearth, something ridiculed and laughed at. There is nothing beautiful or exciting about it. Sadly, Charley Brown's tree only earned him scorn and ridicule rather than admiration and appreciation. How similar to the situation for Jesus.

If you recall, the *Charley Brown Christmas* story line features virtually all the children focused on the commercialism that typically predominates the American pre-Christmas Day landscape. Even Snoopy does his part, and splendidly I might add, with an all-decked-out doghouse, whereupon Charley Brown moans, exclaiming, "My own dog. Gone commercial. I can't stand it!"

By my assessment, *A Charley Brown Christmas* does a spectacular, though poignant, job of setting up the unavoidable tension we all face each Advent season. A tension exists between two theological-ideological viewpoints. However, I do not think the two are mutually exclusive. I don't think it has to be one or the other, but finding something of a balance.

Our Epistle lesson, believe it or not, is responsible for bringing to mind *A Charley Brown Christmas*. "I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich!" (Revelation 2:9, NIV) Linus knew where our true riches are to be found.

I asked our Session this past Monday evening to comment on this seeming contradiction. How can one be impoverished but yet be rich? Aren't these two situations mutually exclusive? Perhaps one of the greatest lessons from this single verse stems from the fact that materialism has less, than is often thought, to do with our spiritual well-being and the sense of love we have of and

from God. "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." Folks who don't know better have often thought of this metaphor as involving a crown such as that a king or queen would wear. However, what was envisioned in the original setting was the laurel type of crown that would be worn by the victor of a sporting event, the symbol of victory in, say, ancient Greece. And even then we cannot leave out the possibility, perhaps even "probability", that those early 2nd century church members of Smyrna had in mind the crown of thorns that Jesus was "crowned" with.

I told our Elders that I've known some folks who have considerable material wealth but who do not seem to be impeded in their love for Jesus nor in terms of their walk of faith. *A Charley Brown Christmas*, as I see it, sets up the scenario by which we are called to consider how two seemingly incompatible world views may, or may not, fit together, that is, rub elbows. Charles Schulz's amazing work of art does not come across as preachy or dogmatic, only tantalizingly engaging, real, and applicable. One cannot help but think of Romans 8:38-39 which says, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (NIV)

As I pondered the nature of the struggle between possession of material things versus access to and possession of spiritual things, I couldn't help but think of St. Francis of Assisi. Francis typifies perhaps most precisely, and eloquently, the concept of "poverty." As part of, or perhaps as a consequence of, his astounding life as a youth and then his subsequent conversion, Francis renounced all earthly possessions. He also required that all who would follow him to do the same. Essentially all he would allow his followers to possess was the full length, long sleeve brown garment that, to this day, is a sign of membership in the order he founded, the Franciscans. He did, however, grant each of them the right to possess the little thin mattress they slept on. Actually, it was more of a little thin mat rather than anything akin to a mattress. When the brothers argued for the right to possess a prayer book he refused, arguing that first they would want a prayer book, and then a breviary, and then a hymn book, and then it would extend on from there. Possessions were nothing but a distraction, and even more they were a barrier to the true spiritual life and life of devotion and service to Jesus. One day at early morning mass, Francis heard the attending priest read to him the Gospel passage (Matthew 10:9-10) which reads, "Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff..." (NIV) Francis took these words literally for precisely what they said and seemed to mean. The estate of which Francis came into he referred to as Lady Poverty. And this state of extreme poverty and deprivation was not limited to the men who entered the Franciscan order. A young woman by the name of Clare was to become as one with them, became the founder of the female version of Francis's little band of followers known as the Poor Clares. Francis and his followers became known as the *Poverello*. [I highly recommend the soul-stirring biography of Francis titled "God's Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi, by Julien Green.]

But yet, the austere life of poverty that had so smitten Francis is not what is commended by our passage from Revelation. The text, in the first place, simply acknowledges the poverty of the church of Smyrna. But the text does not stop there. In the second place, the words of Jesus place the greatest emphasis on the very thing that is the most important - the great spiritual wealth they have by virtue of their fidelity to Jesus. Many of us will always remember and be blessed by hearing Linus recite those beautiful and soul-stirring words of Scripture from Luke's version of the birth narrative. "That is the meaning of Christmas, Charley Brown."

We should also consider the fact that it is not only wealth that has done it but that "poverty" has sometimes been the cause of folks to lose faith in the goodness of God. As material wealth has been the cause of people losing a true sense of what is the most important thing in life, so has poverty. The over all point is that neither riches nor poverty are to cloud our view of what is most important - faith that leads unto eternal life.

Little different from the issue of poverty, the text reflects something of the same view in terms of imprisonment. Though it cannot help but bring about a serious and true concern for the committed Christian over being imprisoned wrongly, our Epistle lesson is an encouragement to remain strong; do not give in to despair, and do not give up the faith that leads to eternal life as indicated by the promise of the crown of life. This particular love letter to the church at Smyrna is sent as a message of encouragement and hope, to remain faithful to the end, whatever it may be and whenever it may come.

Before we close I feel it is important to consider one last connection with the theme of poverty, and that in connection with the mysterious, and ever-frightening, number 666 that many serious Christians are quite concerned over. For those who aren't familiar with it, it is referred to as "the mark of the beast." The beast, according to the text, "forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666." (Revelation 13:16-18, NIV) Lest one point or consequence be overlooked, according to the view of many Christians this foretells of the day when committed Christians will be driven into poverty, and perhaps even starvation death, because they will not bow to "the beast". In our very day, with Covid in the backdrop, and with many other elements of our world situation coming together as they are, there are those who believe we may see this prophecy come true in our life time. However it comes to pass or not in our day, the point is that poverty, probably extreme poverty and starvation may or will come to those who remain committed to Jesus. This very prophecy lends itself to one key point from our Epistle lesson. You may be impoverished, or you may become impoverished, but with that being said, if you have a true faith in and fidelity to Jesus Christ, you are more imaginably rich! You may be "material poor, but in terms of what ultimately matters, you are indeed rich in what ultimately matters. How blessed our world has been in that Linus, although in sort of a

fairly secular way, has for some decades now pointed our world to the truth - the true meaning of Christmas. I don't know about you but I feel incredibly rich because I know what Jesus did and how he came to earth. What a blessed time the season of Advent is. Amen.