

## Rich and Famous

I Samuel 3:1a,10-20; Mark 1:16-28

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(with thanks to Rev. Sue Browning of London, Ontario)

My friend Iva used to watch Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, because, she said, if ever you were feeling like giving up on trying to do some good in the world, there was nothing like it for reinforcing your values.

Did you ever wonder what it would be like to be famous? Someone said, fake it till you make it, and, well, here's an idea I found in a children's sermon resource, and if I get it right, I will probably be famous. So here goes...(pick up sunglasses) Now don't make fun of me: people who are movie stars wear these so that other people won't recognize them, so if I put these on you'll probably think I'm famous...(put them on) What do you think now, am I famous?

...I don't actually feel famous either. Well, maybe these are too generic. Let's try something else...now, some of you may remember this from the Inauguration...(put on copy of Aretha's hat)...Now you're still laughing at me. Well, Aretha's famous, and then Ellen had it on her show the next day, and *she's* famous...Are you saying, sure I can accessorize, but that still doesn't make me famous? Well, then, how *does* a person get to be famous?

How did Samuel and Peter and Andrew and the Sons of Zebedee and a lot of people in the Bible get so famous that thousands of years later, people are still reading about them? How did Jesus get so famous that people are still dedicating their lives to him and trying to live the way he did?

Part of what it means to be famous is that a lot of people know who you are, maybe because people see you a lot, like movie stars, or politicians, or rock stars, or kings and queens. And then a lot of people are famous for being bad, or mean, or just for being famous. Bernard Madoff is famous, and so is Paris Hilton, but not very many people try to be like them—or at least not that they'll admit.

And I suspect that this poor man in Mark's story today was pretty famous in his own home town, the town of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. He was famous for having something wrong with him that was too big for him, or anyone else, to fix. Something that ran *him*, he couldn't run *it*. Nowadays we'd call what he had a disease, but if we perceived it to be a disease primarily of the will and of the spirit, even today, in figurative language, we'd call it—a demon.

Years ago when I worked in the classical music business, my boss used to say, "I don't want to be famous, just rich." And it occurred to me that wanting to be rich, never mind famous, has turned into a very big demon in our lives, all over the world, really, but certainly in our own country and our own lives. It leads us to spend money before we have it, to overextend

ourselves so that we are so constrained by paying off our debt that we can't do the things we want to do. We can't do things unless they're on credit, even give to good causes, because our cash is so tied up in paying off our debt.

And I'm not even talking about out-of-control shopping debt, the kind you hear about on 60 Minutes. I'm talking about all of our debt, and I'd venture to guess most of us, myself included, are in this boat together. I really can't condemn it, because we all have it, this disease, this demon. It is too big and powerful for us: it runs *us*, we don't run *it*.

How did we get here? By trying to fake it till we make it: we try to accessorize ourselves rich: *feel* rich, anyway, if not famous; *feel* free, if only for a moment.

Now economists tell us, right back to Alexander Hamilton, that a certain amount of debt is healthy for the economy and keeps us on our toes. Experts on church growth tell us that it's actually beneficial for a congregation to have a mortgage or a loan they're paying off. Surprising, isn't it?

A lot of our debt, in our families and our international policy, is for very important and worthwhile things, and we have felt as though we had no choice but to go into debt to pay for these things. We haven't necessarily been irresponsible in the big things, but extending ourselves on big things has caused us not to notice all the little things that crept in on their coattails. However it happened, it's all gotten out of hand, a road to Hell paved with good intentions, and now it's time to get honest: our whole country has a demon of debt.

And another indication that this is a demon, or a disease if you prefer, is that it's tabu to talk about it. At the very least, it is not quite nice. You know what I mean: you can talk about sex in church but Heaven forbid you talk about money—let alone the fact that you are over your head.

And yet all those megachurches you hear about, the ones that are growing, are very up front about money. The next time you visit a big church, have a look up on the wall someplace, or maybe it's printed in the bulletin, and you'll see last week's total of offerings displayed for all to see. Not each person's, no, but the weekly total, in comparison usually with the weekly budget for operations and mission.

And in many of those churches, church leaders will come and visit you in your home, which is nice and friendly and all, but they're also having a look at how you live and comparing that to what you're pledging, and if the two don't match up, you're likely to get another visit.

Sounds a little intrusive, doesn't it?

I don't know about you, but a lot of us can't give as much to the church, let alone anything else, as we'd like to, simply because with mortgages, student loans, and credit card balances run up against our better judgement for things we felt we had no choice about, like getting the car fixed and paying for health insurance—forget about trips to Bermuda—a huge chunk of every paycheck is already spent...on debt.

In fact, I am willing to bet that most of us are tithing already—to the bank! The average

American spends fourteen cents on every dollar—that's *fourteen percent*—on interest payments on their debt, supporting an institution that (just read the papers for the last few months!) doesn't even reflect your values. So we could all tithe and come out ahead, if we could just pay down our debt.

And now even those of us who *don't* have very much debt, retired people, are stung with 'way less to live on, and deeply embarrassed not to have enough to give. Our national demons of insouciant debt, predatory loans, and wanting to live in houses that look like Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, have snowballed into a recession and taken our retirement funds down with them.

And here we are on this beloved island at the end of the summer, it's Labor Day tomorrow, "the summer is over and we are not saved," and oh, my gosh, the preacher is talking about money. Who doesn't feel trapped? Who doesn't want to cry out, "What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

I believe that, still, Jesus has come to save us, individually and collectively—even from the demon of debt. But it isn't going to be easy or pleasant. It's time to get honest, it's time to strip our hearts and our pretenses bare, roll up our sleeves in our churches and really be the Body of Christ together.

The fame of Jesus spread throughout the countryside. For what? For casting out demons, for speaking with true authority out of a deep spiritual bond with God. And when? Right after he said, "Follow me," and Mark says they left their nets and their father and the hired hands and followed Jesus.

Well, now, isn't that a tempting thought! To leave all the old, worn-out nets, full of holes and jellyfish and nasty bits of long-dead fins and claws, and go off and be "spiritual-not-religious" someplace, forget about all the ugliness of life, the feet of clay of the institutional church, swept away in the beauty of holiness, caught up in metaphysical bliss at the feet of such an uplifting and inspiring teacher!

I suspect, in fact I am sure, that in our situation today, Jesus would still say, "Follow me," and then plunk himself right down next to Peter and Andrew, James and John, and start right in mending their nets with them.

Because, my friends, we aren't going to catch any fish without mending our nets first, and that is what Jesus is calling us to do. And mending our nets means getting honest about money, and learning the spiritual discipline of being the best stewards we can be of everything God has given us to manage.

Mending our nets does not mean being stingy. Mending our nets doesn't even mean being thrifty. Mending our nets means talking, as Samuel did to Eli, about things that are hard to hear. It means taking action on ideas that have never been popular, and seldom tried, like the Way of the Cross, like the Widow's Mite, like giving up your life for your friends, like the discipline and sacrifice of self Jesus lived each day; but the good news is, it means also

becoming rich in the things of the Spirit, the Means of Grace: the Word, the Sacraments, and Prayer.

And the church is the very place to learn these hard lessons in. You are going back to your lives and (I hope!) to your faith communities. If after being here together, we can get over our embarrassment, take that first step of admitting that these demons are real: that they run us, we can't run them, *then* we can help and encourage and support each other wherever we are returning to. Can we do that for each other? I dare say we've already begun. Can this unfold even more? Can we trust one another even more? What love and peace and wholeness that would be!

Yes, most of our churches want to grow, but we have to have something irresistibly attractive — and that something is *real faith, real gratitude, real freedom*. We can grow together in these through the exercise of learning to tame the demon of debt, so that, as my friend Bill Philippe says, our net income can catch up with our gross habits, and we can learn together the joy of living debt-free — and the richness of giving freely in our neighborhood, our church, and our world. And that, my friends, will be a grace that is irresistible.

I think it is just possible that this mending of nets can become the foundation for spiritual renewal. I think it is just possible that Jesus wants to sit right down there with us. And I think it is just possible that if we let him, he will transform us into something so rich that we can't help being famous, because we shall have become the church we hardly dare dream to be.

AMEN.