

**Sermon for November 15, 2015 (Proper 28 amended, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 5:1-12 (CEB); Psalm 16; Mark 13:1-8 – James series, episode 8

Title: Consider the treasure...hear the cries.

My dear friends: we have a problem.

And I am not, at this moment, thinking of the Islamic State and their terrorist agents.

We have a money problem. And the Letter of James brings this problem front and center before us this morning.

From the very beginning of this brief little letter, James has had two primary audiences: the messianic Jewish communities of believers who are suffering, AND the wealthy and powerful ones who are oppressing them.

You may remember this from our first foray into this letter of James back when we began this series back on September 13.

“Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away” (James 1:9-11).

The suffering believers versus the powerful rich.

Is it any surprise that James is channeling the great Hebrew prophets of old when he writes this strident rebuke?

The Hebrew prophets received God’s message for ALL segments of their society and they delivered it as faithfully as possible, regardless of whether or not ALL people would hear and receive this message.

James is functioning in the exact same way. He is thoroughly castigating the rich in these verses, but there is no expectation that the rich will actually hear these words! THOSE people are NOT reading this letter. Why would they?

Instead, God's condemnation of the oppressors is intended to strengthen the hearts of the suffering and patiently enduring faithful by assuring them, in strong and clear language, that God is on their side.

My friends: you and I need to hear this message as well, but perhaps WE need to hear it from the other side.

God does take sides. God sides with the poor, the powerless, the oppressed. God opposes those who seek to live in luxury and pleasure, those who ignore the suffering of the poor because it is inconvenient or uncomfortable.

This is what the Bible teaches. Let there be no doubt about it.

There are over 500 instances in the Bible which teach us that to be faithful to God means caring for the needs of the poor.

You and I might not like this, and I know many people try to explain this away, but it is all there, and if we are going to be faithful to Christ, then we must take this seriously.

And the uncomfortable truth is that you and I are now among the rich and wealthy. On a global scale, if your NET income is more than \$33,000 per year, then YOU are part of the wealthiest 1 percent of humanity.

So congratulations! How does it feel to be so wealthy? To be in such an elite class? Well, if you are like me, then you may not FEEL like you are rich and wealthy, but the numbers do not lie.

We need to dig deeper, however, to discover what these numbers mean for our lives..

What the Holy Spirit tells me is that you and I have a money problem.

But our problem with money is NOT that we have consistent food on the table for 3 meals every day, or that we are saving money for college tuitions or retirements accounts.

Our money problem is primarily a spiritual one. You and I are thoroughly obsessed with the myth of money, and it clouds our vision in every single aspect of life.

Let me tell you an old story about a community of brothers in the 4th century desert of Egypt. It is said that once a very wealthy nobleman came to visit these brothers and brought with him a large bag of gold. And this nobleman went to the presiding elder and asked him to distribute the gold among the brothers.

But the elder said to him: "The brothers do not need this."

However, the nobleman was persistent and he would not take no for an answer, so he placed all of the gold in a basket and placed the basket at the entrance of the crude little chapel where the brothers gathered for the Eucharist.

And during the liturgy, the presider said to the brothers: "Whoever needs it, may take some of the gold."

But do you know what happened? No one touched it. In fact, no one even looked at all of that gold! They completely ignored it.

After the blessing and dismissal, the elder told the nobleman: "God has accepted your offering. Go now and give this to the poor."

And it is said that this man went away greatly encouraged by his visit with the brothers.

My friends, think for a moment: do you know WHY the brothers ignored the basket full of gold? It was not because they had no need of it.

They were poor, dressed in torn rags, working with their own hands to scrape together a few coins each day which with to buy some food, living in caves or small mud huts in the desert.

By all accounts, these men were poor. But when they gathered for the Eucharist, their only goal was to draw near to God. They feed on the goodness of God. To be changed by the grace of God.

That basket of gold was only a petty distraction. Gold means nothing when compared to the body and blood of Christ. Wealth has no value compared to the word of God.

What do you think would happen if we tried a similar experiment here at Saint Mary's? Honestly!

If we placed a basket of \$100 bills up here in the Chancel on one Sunday and I announced that anyone who needs it could take some, what do you think would happen?

Would the idea of that money just sitting there overshadow the idea of being in the presence of God? Which is more real? God or money.

If I actually had the nerve to take a \$100 bill – which I don't, and I don't have a spare \$100 bill – but if I did and I ripped it in half, would any of you be shocked?

You understand, right, that it has no actual, objective value. It is just a piece of paper. And gold has no objective value. It is just a rock from the earth.

These things have no real value apart from the story that we choose to tell about them. This is the myth of money which has captivated the imagination of humankind.

And so I ask you again: Which is more real in YOUR life? God or money?

You need to answer that question for yourself, but this is what I know to be true: God has called the church together to live as an alternative community where the reality of God always trumps the myth of money.

An alternative community where we are free to eschew luxury and pleasure in order to practice radical generosity toward the poor, because we are no longer beholden to the power of money.

Oh, my friends, there is so much more to be said about this problem that we have, and about this amazing text in the letter of James. We are barely scratching the surface now! But we need to address something else as well.

On Friday and Saturday, as we all heard about the suicide attacks in Beirut and then in Paris, I wondered about the connection to our readings this morning, and especially to James' rebuke of the wealthy.

To be honest, I am not sure how to connect them. Perhaps there IS a connection between radical Islamic ideology and the aftermath of Western colonialism, but that is more than we can hope to cover in a Sunday sermon.

Perhaps, for those of us who long to see God's will done on this earth just as it is in the heavens, perhaps we can find solace in James' call to patient endurance.

"You also must wait patiently," James wrote, "strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near" (James 5:8).

Regardless of what the coming of the Lord might actually look like or what that realistically even means, to wait patiently for the Lord is a state of mind, an approach toward this real world which is vital for each disciple.

We are always looking beyond what is – with hope – toward a brighter horizon in the future. The Lord is coming, the Lord is near.

And do you know WHY this is such good news?

Yes, there will continue to be "wars and rumors of wars", but we are NOT in a closed system which depends entirely upon us.

We must do good in the world – as much as we can – and seek peace at all times.

But you and I are NOT the saviors of this world. Everything does NOT depend upon us. Even when we cannot see a way forward or a way out, there is always hope. Because the coming of the Lord is near!

What we suffer now "is but the beginning of the birth pangs" (Mark 13:1-8).

Let the jihadis take their best shot. They cannot change this truth.

The Judge is already "standing at the door", and this Judge "is full of compassion and mercy."

So even for us wealthy folks, and even for this very troubled world, there is always hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.