

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

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What Price Commerce?

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 12:15b-21; 1 Kings 10:26-29

The reign of King Solomon stretches across ten chapters of the First Book of Kings in the Old Testament. Several of these chapters focus upon the great wealth which Solomon accumulates during his years in power. We read of prodigious amounts of prized commodities which flow into the kingdom—precious gems, precious metals, spices in great quantity, fine woods, ivory, exotic animals, expensive garments, weapons, horses and mules. In these descriptions, however, gold figures most prominently. Lots of gold. Many tons of gold imported into the kingdom on an annual basis. The gold is made into shields, into vessels for drinking; it is used to overlay the holy places of the temple Solomon builds; and the gold is stored in great quantities.

In the opulent, extravagant days of the late 90's, I was invited to give an invocation for a dinner at a jewelers convention in New York. One of the courses was served with a small amount of thin gold foil, edible gold. Perhaps they were eating gold in Solomon's day, too. In fact, the Scripture writer claims that there is

so much gold in Jerusalem at the time that they no longer care about silver. “Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.”

But, where do all these riches come from? What is the source of so much gold?

Scripture gives us the answer. The curious thing is that it’s not an answer that shows up in the Sunday school curriculum. The key verses never make it into the lectionary, a cycle of readings used for preaching in many churches. Since they are so rarely discussed, we might even say that the sources of Solomon’s wealth are a bit obscure, hidden even. However, the truth is that they are hidden in plain view. Solomon’s biggest source of revenue is from international trade. Through various alliances and agreements, he gains access both to the Mediterranean and the Red seas and sends his ships forth on trade missions. He also controls important overland routes between Egypt and Asia. Still, Israel in this period is probably not producing much of value. Scripture mentions no significant manufacturing, mineral extraction, or high value agricultural production such as spices or rare woods. Yet, Solomon has access to all of these. What is he trading to gain these things? Former Prime Minister of Israel Golda Meir said, “Moses and the Israelites wandered through the wilderness for forty years, and they stopped at the one place in the Near East that has no oil.”

I am going to read to you now our second Scripture lesson for the day.

Solomon gathered together chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem.

The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedars as numerous as the sycamores of the Shephelah.

Solomon's import of horses was from Egypt and Kue, and the king's traders received them from Kue at a price.

A chariot could be imported from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for one hundred fifty; so through the king's traders they were exported to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Aram.

1 Kings 10:26-29

It's a simple description, absent the complex details of numerous transactions, but these few verses tell us all that we need to know. Solomon is an international weapons dealer, the middleman in arms trafficking between North Africa and South West Asia. He invests in rolling stock—horses and chariots—which come from the south and brokers them to the kingdoms on his north, making a healthy profit along the way.¹ He is known for his shrewdness, getting the best end of deals—chapter nine gives a brief description of how he swindles King Hiram, his primary ally. And, towards his own citizens, Solomon is ruthless—high taxation for all and forced labor for many.

The Scripture writers want us to know that there is something wrong in Israel—something unseemly about this golden age. Yes, there are the great and impressive building programs, relative peace with the surrounding nations,

domestic tranquility (though perhaps of a repressive sort), and large, accumulated riches, at least for those at the top. But, at what cost? What is the true cost?

Again, for Solomon, we know the answer. Following his death, the nation disintegrates in civil war. North and South will be forever split apart, two relatively weak kingdoms in a rather dangerous region of the ancient world.

In our own day, we've had a reckoning of sorts. We've been tallying the costs of commerce run amok, trading without safeguards or controls, an increasing concentration of economic and political power. And the pollution of our air and water in the name of progress. For many, it seemed like a fun ride. For many more, it's been a nightmare.

Counting costs: it's an important discipline for all of us. Not simply to sum up what has already happened, but to provide guidance for us as we look forward. Jesus talks a great deal about the costs of discipleship. He doesn't want any of his followers to suffer from the illusion that the path of faithfulness is an easy one, without challenge. It requires sacrifice. It summons us to commit ourselves completely. And yet, choosing another path may exact a more terrible toll: missing out on the very essence of life and its deepest joy, and not only for us, but for those around us, too.

Unfortunately, success, or even the promise of success, can blind us to those costs. Why ask questions when things seem to be going well?

I remember clearly a night many years ago, late in my college days. I attended a party in my home town. I was at a table with a bunch of guys my age, none of them close friends; they had attended rival high schools, but I knew most of them. At that time, and in that setting, we all thought we were invincible. We began talking about our lives. One fellow had a new girlfriend. One had just bought a motorcycle. Another one was applying to law school. The fellow next to me said he was going to become a chef. That brought out a few chuckles. “You must be crazy!” someone said, “you’ll never make a living.” Then, someone asked me what I was going to do.

“I’m heading into the ministry,” I said. That brought out some more laughter.

“You really must be crazy,” someone else said.

A few months later the girlfriend of the first guy was pregnant. Their relationship did not survive an abortion. The motorcycle rider. He died tragically in his late twenties, yes in a motorcycle accident. The chef? He did become a chef, and a renowned one at that. I saw his picture in one of Peggy’s cooking magazines. Obviously, I got into ministry.

Around the table that night, we were counting up our opportunities in a variety of ways. Some were doing a poor job of counting the costs.

Oh yes, I forgot to mention the lawyer. The last I heard he was very involved in his church, doing a good deal of legal work for his diocese and had decided (get this) to go to seminary and is entering the Episcopal ministry.

Parker Palmer is a leader in education who's done a lot of writing on the importance of calling. He says that true calling is when "our passion meets the world's needs."

It's not simply about what I like to do. What I think is fun. What I believe will give me the highest income or the most secure employment prospects. True calling brings me and my desires together with the world and its needs. That is the only way that cost and benefit are brought into balance.

The world does not need any more arms dealers, merchants of death. That was true in Solomon's day. It's certainly true today.

When news reporters linked a single gun dealer in Wisconsin to the killers at Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois, and the health club in Pittsburg—they each had bought guns or accessories from his business—he responded that he didn't know what the fuss was all about. After all these killers could have bought the same items from Wal-Mart. He's right. They could have done that.

We have all the weapons merchants we need in our world, and all the weapons, too—we've had enough of those who profit from the misery of others. What we need are those who find profit in the joy of others: men and women who

are willing to look further than the bottom line, look beyond today only, look outside their own limited field of vision to understand the consequences of their actions and the impact of their choices. And to make those choices not based on what's really good for me, but what's really good for everyone around me, not based on what's good right now, but what is good for eternity.

And when we do that, we may not have Solomon's gold. Besides, the price for that might be too high. But we will have more than his wisdom, thanks to Christ, our Savior, who has already paid the largest price, for us.

¹ Walter Brueggeman, *Solomon: Israel's Ironic Icon of Human Achievement (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament)*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005.)