

Sermon – 12th Pentecost
Romans 12:1-8 & Matthew 25:14-30
August 27, 2017
“Set for Life”

6,7,16,23,26...plus a 4. If she does nothing else with her \$336 million dollars, Mavis Wanczyk of Chicopee, Massachusetts should get herself a real nice framed print with those numbers on it. They changed her life. In the near term with fame and considerable wealth. In the long term of course, who knows? If you don't know, Mavis Wanczyk is the most recent Powerball Lottery winner, claiming with those six randomly chosen numbers the largest lottery prize in history. It's fun I suppose to ponder what we'd do if we could trade places with her. One commentator however told the Wall Street Journal that Ms. Wanczyk has already messed things up by claiming her prize so quickly, and not doing enough to shield herself from what is sure to be quite an enlarged circle of friends and second cousins.

Said expert was quoted as saying *“she's wealthy now and needs to start acting like it.”* Mavis said; *“I wanted to get this over and done with so everyone would leave me alone.”* Excuse me, Mavis - no one leaves a checking account with \$336 million dollars in it alone. What would you do if financially you were suddenly, as they say, “set for life?” Back to said “expert” –who said she needs to protect herself and *“hide”* behind a team of consisting of an attorney, an accountant, and a financial advisor. For her part Mavis did two things – first she quit her modest hospital job and then announced she plans to just *“hide in bed for a while.”* We'll see. But back to my point, and I do have a biblical point to make here – what does one do when you discover you've been un-expectantly and undeservedly blessed?

Addressing that is the ambition of both of our lessons today. We'll begin in Romans. The conventional thinking about the letter to the Romans is that it pivots again, dramatically, in chapter 12, moving from pure theology to practical advice. On first glance one can see why. Our lesson today, and especially the remainder of chapter 12 which we'll take up next week, appears to be about how to behave as a Christian. This is in marked contrast to previous chapters of Romans which described how God in Christ justifies sinners and makes them Christians in the first place. But we Lutherans say the Bible is the source and norm of our faith *and* our life. Look at it this way – if you've hit it big (think Ms. Mavis again) what is the proper response? The “theology” of Romans 12 concludes that every Christian has hit it big and the worst response we can make is to think it's time to hide and go it alone.

Whereas in the earlier chapters of Romans Paul went on at length about how sin is both personal *and* a mark of the whole human race – now he argues that the grace of God to sinners is very personal (it's your gift) but it is also a mark of the church. Put another way, the mark of Christians and the church is right thinking and right living – and right thinking and living begins by asking a very personal question – now that I am so blessed, what's next? Paul's answer is, well, quite the opposite of Mavis Wanczyk's – get to work! I don't want to take this sermon down the worst of all possible paths – a theology of good works instead of grace – but folks it's rather difficult to read Romans 12 or Matthew 25 apart from works of some kind.

We simply can't "spiritualize" ourselves out of the gist of either lesson – which is "*to whom much has been given much is expected.*" "*All right pastor*", you say, "*how much*" and all I can say, because it's all Paul and Jesus say – is "something." But what you can't do is hide behind the grace of God, as though it were a team of lawyers and accountants protecting you and making the decisions about your spiritual welfare for you. Regardless of whether it was wise or not Ms. Mavis is now in the spotlight – she owns the money and now owns the decisions about what to do with it.

"I appeal to you brothers and sisters by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice." Not too many other ways of reading Paul here than "*you're a big winner, and now you've got to make some decisions about how you are going to put your winnings to work.*" You have a redeemed soul, your body, though frail, is destined for eternal life, and as the old saying goes, a mind is a terrible thing to waste – so don't - waste it that is on things that don't matter or last. Open it to the mind of Christ! A lot of times people, and this includes some Christians, think that living a Christian life is kind of "immature" since you are guided (impelled they may say) by rules derived from someone else (even if that someone else is God) and not by thinking things through for yourself.

That is not Christian living at all Paul says. Christian living and decision-making means thinking about things all the time, but with the referent of Jesus, not the world. Yes, Christianity - like accounting or teaching or medicine or government or any other sphere of life - has some boundaries within which adherents must work, their "best practices". But Paul says Christianity, once a heart is opened by the grace of God, is best understood as a mind opened by that same grace. It is a mind awake, alert, determined to understand why we were created in the first place and why human life was meant to be lived in one way rather than another.

In the beginning of Romans Paul says the real problem with the world is that its thinking is all wrong – it has ignored or missed all the wisdom God revealed about precisely how the world should work and humans should contribute to its proper functioning. Which means we could go so far as to say the real immature thinkers out there are people who simply look at the surrounding culture, with its shallow or silly ways of living, and copy it more or less unthinkingly! Mavis...you're set for life...put it to work well! Christian...you're set for life. Now what?

This sounds like the ol "*bait and switch*" routine to some. And if you read Jesus in our parable from Matthew today, it sounds like God has given us some sort of syllabus to study and any day now there will be a pop quiz. Good things for those with good grades...not so good for those who don't do their homework! Except that sort of interpretation runs head long into all four gospels that speak of a Jesus who had come to seek and save those who hadn't studied much less gotten particularly high marks in life – who often warned those experts in the material – the scribes and Pharisees that folks like tax collectors and prostitutes who would have failed most any Judaism 101 class, that they'd pass on to the Kingdom of Heaven before they would!

No, the truly important takeaway from both Jesus and Paul is this – you've won. You've truly won. You're set for life. You have the wealth of God's mercy toward you. So act like it, do something with it, and while you're at it and do it with a smile on your face - you winner you!

AMEN

