

So, I recently read an article from Bloomberg about wealth in the United States of America entitled “The 50 Richest Americans Are Worth as Much as the Poorest 165 Million”.²



Can we wrap our minds around the fact that fifty people in this country have as much wealth as 165 million?³ Put in another way, fifty people own as much money as half the country. Let us quantify this wealth reality. The richest fifty people in the country are worth two trillion dollars.⁴ This should make any progressive, any conservative, and Republican, any Democrat, any socialist, and any capitalist sick.



² Ben Steverman and Alexandre Tanzi, “The 50 Richest Americans Are Worth as Much as the Poorest 165 Million”, *Bloomberg*, October 8, 2020.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ “Bloomberg Billionaires Index”, *ibid.*

Let me share with you more that I learned. The top 1% of the United States population owns 34 trillion dollars and the poorest 50 percent of the county owns two trillion dollars.⁵ I studied theology and history and not mathematics, but that means one percent of the population owns 17 times as much as 50 percent of the country. If we are confessing Christians, of any and all political stripes, that one percent owns 34 trillion and 50 percent owns two trillion should make us nauseous.

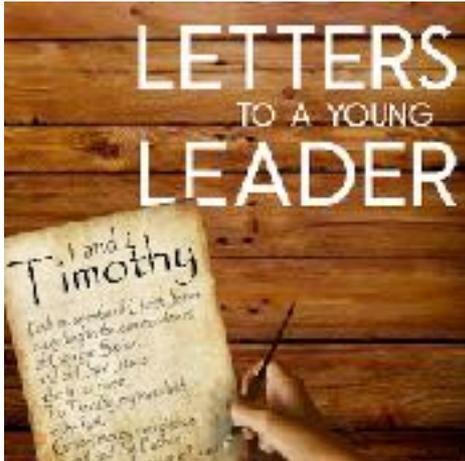


Let us come down a little bit and look at one man. Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com. During 2020 alone, in the middle of pandemic, when so many United States citizens are suffering from this pandemic, Bezos' fortune jumped 64%.⁶ In fact, on Wednesday, this past Wednesday, Wednesday alone, Bezos earned five billion dollars.⁷ Five billion dollars in one day. Gosh, that is sobering.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

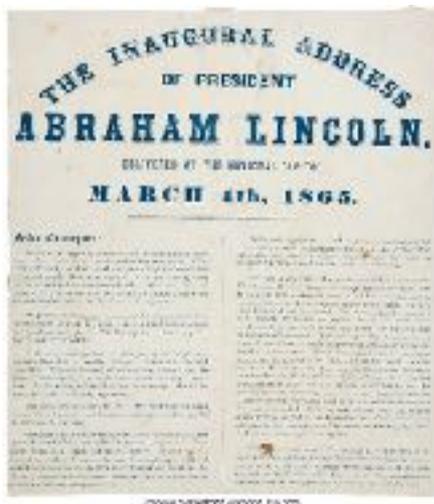


Let us turn to our scripture this morning. In Timothy's first letter, and indeed with similar 'pastoral epistles' like II Timothy and Titus, we have a senior pastor writing to a junior pastor. It would be a bit like David Stinson, or Jack Bixby, or Allen Vander Meulen writing to me as a younger minister. In this letter to me, David, Jack, or Allen are writing to me from a context whereby "the church is against the world".⁸ Earlier in the letter, there is reference to the present age being hostile. The world is the "enemy" (5:14). In short, Christians during the early church were advised to be counter-culture or contrary to the ways of the world.



⁸ Eric Lane Titus, "The First Letter of Paul to Timothy", in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1971), 882.

Before the conclusion of I Timothy, the senior minister lectured his younger apprentice, Timothy, that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (6:10a). The mentor lamented that “some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith...” (6:10b). The conclusion of the letter is a charge to the protégé to “command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor put their hope in wealth” (6:17). The elder minister advises all to “be generous and willing to share” (6:18).



Abraham Lincoln in his second inaugural address also examined the issue of wealth and inequity and questioned how Christians in the North and the South can be of the same faith, yet those in the South maintained and wished to expand a parasitic relationship with African-Americans who they kept as slaves. Let us hear Lincoln’s musings in the second section of his address.⁹

“One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it.

⁹ March 4, 1865

These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully”.

What I love about Lincoln's address is the paradox. Lincoln took sides, no doubt. Lincoln alluded to which side was more right and which side was more wrong.



Lincoln raised all our eyebrows at the Confederacy that sought to amass wealth and power at the expense of Black slaves. Yet, Lincoln did not do so self-righteously as do many progressives today (yes, me included!). Lincoln claimed the right, but in his address he did not hurl stones. He did not insult, demean, nor curse his adversary. No. His address constituted an olive branch, a hand of fellowship. There was no gloating. Lincoln did not lord over his adversaries an air of superiority. I think that was because Lincoln knew the North was not blameless. Lincoln knew industrialists in the North also behaved in a parasitic manner toward those who earned great wealth on their behalf.

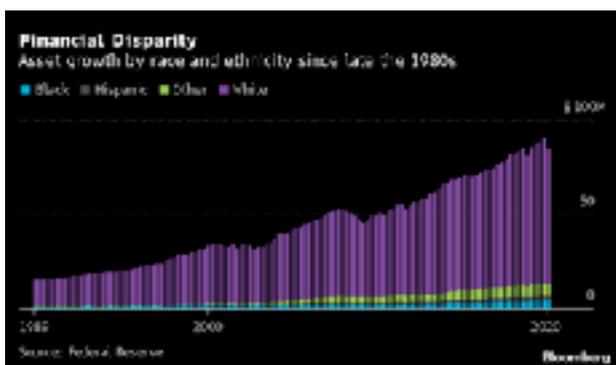


Jack Bixby and I shared an appreciation of a Richard Rohr meditation this week in which the example of St. Francis was lauded. Rohr spoke of a Franciscan teaching called 'soft prophesy' whereby "the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better".¹⁰

¹⁰ Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Week Forty, "St. Francis: A Message for Our Times, The Soft Prophecy of Francis", Friday, October 9, 2020.



Through St. Francis and Father Rohr, we learn that those on the so-called 'Left' have often become negative, oppositional, elitist, condescending, paternalistic, judgemental, and even just plain mean. In contrast, I believe Lincoln in his address and practice exemplified 'soft prophesy'. Sadly, just a month and a half later, a southern sympathizer named John Wilks Booth responded to Lincoln's soft prophesy with a bullet into Lincoln's skull.¹¹ Such is the power of greed and avarice of which the writer of I Timothy warned.



Let's conclude with two more bits of information about United States wealth from Bloomberg. Whites compose 61% of the population while owning

¹¹ April 15, 1865

84% of the wealth.¹² African-Americans compose 13% of the population and own 4% of the country's wealth.¹³ Of the 25 richest Americans, only one is not White - and none are Black.¹⁴ The evil that caused the Civil War is still ever-present.

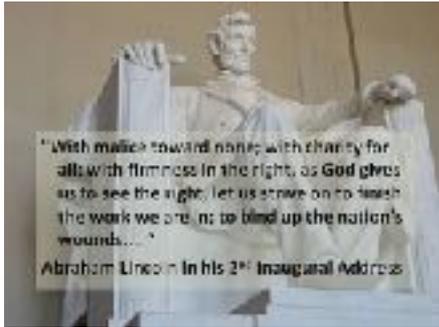


The author of I Timothy provides all of us with wise counsel: "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness" (6:11). This Lincoln did in his second inaugural address by invoking charity and goodwill. Yet, Lincoln also took sides and fought the "good fight of the faith" that engenders justice for all (6:12). Lincoln was a great example of Francis' 'soft prophesy'. Even though 'in the right', Lincoln did not belittle or humiliate.

¹² "Race and Ethnicity in the United States", *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_and_ethnicity_in_the_United_States, accessed October 10, 2020.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Eric Yuan, a Chinese American and founder of ZOOM, who is worth 20 billion dollars. Steverman and Tanzi, *Bloomberg*.



“With malice toward none”, his words spoke truth about wealth, oppression, and inequality.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to you at home, the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.