

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
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Pentecost 1
Luke 16:1-13

This a sermon about money. Now, I'm a good enough mind reader to know that a fair number of you just said to yourselves, "Oh no, is he going to ask us for some?" A perfectly natural reaction, and one that actually begins to give us a clue about what I really want to talk about, and that is our relationship to money and how that affects some far more important relationships, namely our relationship to God and to other people. You know, for many of us, the way we relate to money creates a real barrier to healthy, loving, life-giving relationships with others. And our relationship to money can act as a real barrier between us and a free-flowing, heartfelt connection to the Divine Source for all our life.

OK. So with that as a kind of thesis statement, let's take a look at this very strange parable we hear this morning from Jesus. Really clear and straightforward, isn't it? Not! One scholar calls this parable of the dishonest steward "one of the great exegetical mountains of Scripture." Throwing up his hands in defeat, he goes on to say, "This bewildering parable and the positive use Jesus makes of its shifty protagonist may never be satisfactorily solved until faith is in sight. In the meantime, perhaps the best we can hope is that our joining the quest for a solution, the grappling of God's people with even the difficult parts of God's book, produces a weary but earnest friendship among the children of light in this generation."

Now there is a man who is waving the white flag of surrender. And he's not alone. Scholars have been scratching their heads over this one for a very long time. So we too can scratch our heads over the multiple threads in this parable, but let's do it in our Bible study of Luke's gospel that happens at the Adult Forum and on Tuesday mornings. We'll get to this parable probably around Advent, so stay tuned.

For this morning, in a ten-minute sermon, let's take a look at this parable from about 10,000 feet and see if we can tease out at least part of its meaning.

Among the great themes of Luke's gospel is how the incoming Kingdom of God will reverse the status of the rich and the poor. In fact, Luke refers to the poor and the rich more than any other gospel. When the Angel Gabriel gives Mary the startling news that she will bear a child who will be the Savior, she says, in wonder, "The Lord has looked with favor on his lowly servant, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." In his

opening address to a crowd at the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus says he has come to “bring good news to the poor.” In another parable, a rich fool thought he was fixed for life because of all the stuff he owned, but that very night the Lord demanded his life from him. “Life does not consist of an abundance of possessions,” Jesus warned. There are many more examples of this throughout the gospel. Jesus talks throughout the gospel about a different way of using our wealth. Our wealth belongs to God and we are to use our wealth for God’s purposes and not simply for our own convenience.

If we are to be followers of the Jesus we meet in Luke’s Gospel, we are challenged to deal seriously with God’s call on our resources in the context of our life-styles and in the context of our caring communities in our materialistic culture that glamorizes wealth and that has seen an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. We can’t spiritualize it. We have to step up to the challenge Jesus presents us.

Now let’s get a little closer to our parable. It’s important to know that the parable is placed right between the Parable of the Prodigal son and the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus that we’ll read next Sunday. Like the prodigal, our dishonest steward has “squandered” what was entrusted to him. And like the story that follows, our parable begins with the phrase, “there was a rich man.” Each of those three parables, in their own way, are about the relationship of person to money and how money can be used to either create or harm relationships with other people. Consistent with Luke’s theme of how the Kingdom of God reverses the existing order of things, the dishonest steward’s shrewd behavior – another translation for “shrewd” is “prudent” – creates relationships of hospitality for himself that he will need if, as he fears, his master throws him out. Remember, he’s said he’s too old to dig and too proud to beg, and then, to our surprise, his master commends this behavior.

Why? Well, one thought is that instead of using his dishonestly gained wealth to exploit other people, he has used it to make friends for himself. And Jesus is certainly commending that to his disciples. Don’t use your wealth to exploit others. Use it to build relationships with other people. Releasing others from the suggestion as to how we deal with the “very little” with which we’ve been entrusted. If you haven’t used whatever wealth you have – even if it was acquired dishonestly – in a faithful way, how will you be entrusted with the riches of the kingdom? And then, finally, the money quote. “No slaves can serve two masters. You can’t serve God and wealth.” In other words, our values, our relationship to our money, needs to align with the values of God’s Kingdom. And what are those values? Luke’s Gospel spells them out pretty clearly over and over.

Support the poor. Providing hospitality to all, including the ones on the margins of society. Caring for the sick. Building relationships based on mutuality and respect.

Praising God in all things. Those are the Kingdom values that disciples are to use their wealth to support. When the disciples' values are aligned with Kingdom values – which means the disciple trusts God for security instead of looking for security in our wealth, the old paradigm gets turned upside down. New friendships emerge. Outsiders and the ones lower down the social and economic ladder become the ones we depend on to welcome us. And welcome us not only into their homes in this life, but even into the “eternal home.”

So I hope this parable will lead us to some reflection this week about our own relationship to our money. Jesus, you know, never condemns wealth. Money after all is just a commodity like any other. It's when our relationship to money becomes a barrier between us and fully embracing and loving and caring for others, when we place our faith and trust in our stuff instead of in our loving God who is, after all, the Source of our lives, that's when Jesus gets concerned.

Right after the great poet and song writer Bob Dylan became a Christian, he wrote a song called, “You Gotta Serve Somebody.” The song makes our parable's point. We will all serve somebody. The question is, “Who will we serve?”

Will we serve our stuff or will we serve God? And putting it that way, where do you think real freedom lies? Pretty obvious, isn't it? So now is the time to get serious about aligning the values we place on our money with values of the Kingdom. Can we direct more of our resources towards care and compassion for others? What does extending hospitality to those who aren't like us look like in our lives?

Another one of Jesus' themes that we hear again and again in Luke's Gospel is the theme of losing and finding. The prodigal son had to lose everything before he could find what was of eternal value, his Father's love. The dishonest steward had to lose everything before he could find the hospitality and friendship of his master's debtors. What will we need to lose to find true peace? What will it take for us to let go of our attachments to our money and set it free to serve the Kingdom? Who will we serve this week? Amen.