

Sermon

September 18, 2016 | The 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:1-13 | Peter Lane

Good morning! Let's talk about money. How should we, followers of Jesus or at least people with more than a passing interest in what Jesus has to say, how should we relate to our money? Our passage from Luke ends with Jesus proclaiming, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Let's pick God, shall we? But how?

One common response of the Church has been to glorify the life of poverty. Think Mother Teresa. Or St. Francis. He is super popular because of his love for animals. He did not love money. Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. After a conversion, Francis used some of his father's money to repair a church. Dad was not pleased. Francis responded by stripping himself of all of his father's clothes and setting down all of his father's money. If Francis couldn't serve both God and wealth, he would turn completely away from money. This thinking is not just for saints of the Catholic church. My own uncle was moved by this black and white understanding of the words of Jesus. An intelligent and committed young college student, my uncle got involved in a church that took the Bible seriously. Seriously. Wanting to serve God, my uncle gave away all of his possessions including those that were still sitting in his childhood room. He kept only what fit in a paper bag. I admire Teresa, Francis, even my Uncle's conviction, and I think one legitimate and admirable interpretation of Jesus' words, "You cannot serve God and wealth" is to turn completely away from money, to take a vow of poverty.

But we make a mistake when we think that is the only or even the most admirable way for the Christian to deal with his or her money. If you are looking for *THE* Christian understanding of wealth, you are out of luck. One biblical scholar says there is a "consistent inconsistency." While our passage ends with "You can not serve wealth and God," Jesus also seems to be praising this shrewd money manager. Once again, we must reject the binary. God. Wealth. Nope. As is so often the case with Christian ethics, there is nuance and discernment and a 3rd way.

I mean, even those who vow poverty have different understandings of what that means. Fr. James Martin describes a Jesuit's vow of poverty as a "sensible simplicity." "We're not supposed to be... twig-eating, cave-dwelling hermits..." (That is a crack against Francis who had his own cave.) Martin then tells that great joke about the Jesuits, "about the young novice who's brought into a Jesuit community on the feast of St. Ignatius... he sees the tables laid out and filet mignon on the plate and beautiful flowers, and he says, 'If this is poverty, bring on chastity.'"

Francis sought poverty. The Jesuits simplicity. Clement of Alexandria, great Saint of the Church born just 100 years after Jesus' death, argued more positively for wealth. He says, "Riches, then, which benefit also our neighbors, are not to be thrown away. For [those riches] are...instruments which are for good use to those who know the instrument." Clement is not claiming that money doesn't cause a lot of problems. It certainly does. But don't blame the money itself. It is merely an instrument. Money doesn't kill people. People kill people.

I believe that Clement's understanding of money is the one most helpful to us here in Chicago in 2016. Riches which benefit also our neighbors are not to be thrown away. You cannot serve God and wealth. But if you choose to serve God, wealth can be an instrument to bring God glory.

John Wesley, 18th Century Anglican priest and founder of the Methodists, is with me and Clement. Preaching on our exact passage from Luke, Wesley spoke to his listeners about the "right use of money." "For, let the world be as corrupt as it will, is gold or silver to blame? ... The fault does not lie in the money, but in them that use it." "[Money] is a most compendious instrument of transacting all manner of business, and (if we use it according to Christian wisdom) of doing all manner of good." I hope, with Clement and Wesley as my witnesses, we can agree that Jesus was indeed praising the shrewd manager. The mistake our manager made was perhaps laziness, not making good deals before, only sitting idly by while his master's wealth

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did nothing. The fault was not in the money but in the manager. And once the manager started doing his job, good things came from the money. How can we use our money according to Christian tradition? Wesley has a catchy explanation. Gain all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can. And Wesley's audience was not the rich—methodism had its power in the common people.

Gain all you can. That sounds like some hyper-capitalist mating call. Actually Wesley uses that section to constrain how much you can gain. Gain all you can in a way that 1) does not hurt your body and allows for proper food and sleep, 2) in a way that does not hurt your mind, and 3) in a way that does not hurt your neighbor. Wesley thinks that work is a gift from God and so is the money that comes from it. So, gain all you can. But not in a way that is harmful to you or your neighbor. Wesley's next two principals are more straightforward. Save and Give. Wesley recognizes that it is not always easy to decide how to spend or give one's money. He gives questions to help us understand if we are spending our money rightly. Before you spend, ask yourself, "In expending this, am I acting according to my character?" and secondly, "Am I acting herein, not as a proprietor, but as a steward of my Lord's goods?"

That second question is so powerful. It understands life as a gift. And that includes money. Life as gift. Wealth as gift. Neither the bible as a whole nor the Gospel of Luke have a single rule for how to deal with money. But there is a consistent ethic, life is a gift. That stands against our culture. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove writes, "The economic assumptions of our world are clear: resources are limited, and there is only so much food, time, and money to go around. Survival demand that each of us get what we need first. Once we've done that, we may move on to think of others, calculating the best way to manage limited resources. But the table of our Lord defies that logic. Jesus doesn't assume scarcity, but plenty. He proclaims abundance through seemingly reckless gift giving..." Jesus proclaimed, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Francis and Teresa and my Uncle thought that meant that they should get rid of money. Another

interpretation is to understand money as a gift, as an instrument, and to act in gratitude.

This does not lower the pressure on how we use our money. We must be good stewards, shrewd even sometimes. That is not easy. And the Gospel of Luke is much clearer about what we must avoid than what we must do. We can not be acquisitive or greedy or envious. No stealing or fraud. No oppressing or withholding wages. No neglecting widows and orphans. If you do any of those things, you are misusing your money. Luke does not provide such an easy list of things we must do. For there is great freedom in faith. But the Eucharistic table gives us a model. Share. Luke Timothy Johnson concludes an article about Luke and wealth by saying, "Every open-handed sharing of possessions equally enacts the very essence of faith."

Thank God for the good gifts in our life, including whatever money we might have. It is not ours, but a gift. God does not want us to reciprocate by giving God a gift. Rather God desires us to act in the same way as God, with generosity. Before I spend money this week, I will try and remember Wesley's two questions. Is this in line with my character? Am I acting as the owner of this money or as its steward? God knows there are many pitfalls. May we know the grace and be given the discernment to relate to our money as gift and to act with gratitude.

Sources:

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