

Sermon

9/18/16

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St. John the Evangelist

Proper 20 (C): Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Today we're going to talk about money. Or, as the O'Jays might sing, "Money, Money, Money moonay." Why are we going to talk about money? Because Jesus talked about money. In fact, Jesus talked more about money than any other topic, except...the Kingdom of God.

I find that strangely comforting, as if Jesus knew that for his original listeners the biggest stumbling block for their following him would be the same thing for us following him.

There are a lot of reasons that money is one of our biggest spiritual hang-ups, the first being that we don't tend to think of money in a spiritual way. Nothing is more soulless than dollar bills; nothing kills faith faster than a capital campaign, the thinking goes. But think about how many aspects of your life revolve around money—how many hours you spend making it, how many interactions are based on it. If we think God doesn't care how about how we manage such a large portion of our lives, we're letting ourselves off too easy.

Another reason it can really trip us up spiritually is because money, although just paper and plastic, invites us to attach all sorts of thoughts and feelings to it as well. Having money makes us feel important. It makes us feel powerful. It makes us feel safe. It makes things easy.

Importance, power, safety, ease. As nice as those feelings are, we'd be hard pressed to find those attributes glorified by Jesus. Thus it is at this level that we can start to see how money drives a wedge between us, and him. This is what he is talking about when we get this famous line from the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke that we heard this morning: "You cannot serve God and wealth."

You may take umbrage at this passage. In fact I think Jesus wants you to take umbrage at this passage, if the word umbrage had an Aramaic translation.

For starters you may take umbrage with thinking you are money's servant. After all, you are the one in control of your money right? You're the one who gets to choose how it is spent. Of course we need money to survive and compensation for hard work is only fair. But it seems more and more of our lives are consumed with making, worrying about and spending money, to the point where we are subservient to it. How many of your days off are spent in the office, or continually checking your email? How many of your waking hours are spent worrying about money? How much joy do you derive from having the latest and the greatest piece of technology, car, or designer bag? Money's mastery over us comes in all these forms.

This worries me because—and I think this is Jesus' whole point in parable of the dishonest manager that is the first half of our gospel passage today—money is meant to be a **means**, not an end. This is of vital importance. Too often we think of work as the means and money as the end. But this is wrong. Money is meant to do something, it is meant to be used for something. It is not the end goal, it is a means to something else. If we expect money to be our ultimate goal and guide then we are mistaking its purpose, its function and its power.

But if money is a means, not an end, it makes sense to ask, what *is* the end? What is our end? And this is where the only thing Jesus talks about more than money enters the picture. The Kingdom of God is our end. That is our goal and our guide. Enacting God's vision of love and justice on earth as it is in heaven is our source of motivation, the substance of our labor. Money, if used rightly in Jesus' terms, serves to bring about the Kingdom. You cannot serve God and wealth. But your wealth can serve God. Your wealth can contribute to creating a world of abundant life for all its citizens which happen to be all God's creatures which happens to be everyone, everywhere.

This summer I had a parishioner come up to me after a sermon I preached that had something to do with the rich and the poor and he asked, "But you know, I've always wondered, why does God hate rich people?" If I had been prepared for the question (which I wasn't) I would have responded, I don't think God hates rich people, I think God hates idolatry and sin. And idolatry is anything that we put in the place of God, and sin is anything that draws this world away from God's vision for it. Money is often the source of both these problems. When we mistake money for being an end and not a means, that's idolatry. And the danger of this particular idol is that it convinces us our net-worth is determined by the market not our Maker; that our assets are more important than our attributes.

Money is also often the source of injustice, dishonesty and abuse between people. This is what we see in the Old Testament lesson today. Amos, the prophet is speaking the word of God to those who "trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land," those who seek to speed through the Sabbath so they can start raking in the dough again; who practice deceit with false balances in order to maximize profits, treating people as a means to their greedy ends. I'd like to think that these kinds of practices were out of date, but the millions of dollars in fines for rule bending and breaking in the name of maximizing profit that have been levied against our largest financial institutions over recent years, say otherwise.

Banks are not the only ones guilty of such greed though. Churches can fall victim to making money an idol. For it can and does happen in churches that instead of letting our wealth serve God, we make God serve our wealth. For example, televangelists have been known to capitalize on their non-profit status as a church to solicit donations from their thousands of viewers in order to fund a lavish lifestyle for their preachers. Things got so out of hand that back in 2010 the Senate opened an investigation into the six wealthiest televangelists to see if they were violating the law in doing this. No investigation was necessary to determine they were violating the Gospel in doing this. They found a way to sanctify their selfishness. The fancy toys are their end, God becomes their means to get them. But as God says to Amos, "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds."

This is an extreme example, easy to scoff at. But questions of how and for whom we marshal our financial resources as a church should be at the forefront of all our minds. I've said this before in another context, but the budget is a holy document. The same way that your credit card statement is a pretty clear window into your priorities as an individual or a family, a church budget sends a similar message and should be measured against our mission as a community of disciples who seek to follow Christ in all areas our lives, finances included.

So always remember, money is the means, not the end of our lives as human beings. It's necessary, for sure. But not so necessary that it should rule you like a master, making you a slave of it. The best way to show your mastery over money, not its mastery over you, is in how you use it, how you spend it, how you give it away. This is Jesus' repeated message, especially when he encounters someone who he knows has a lot of money—prove to me that you love me more than your money. Use your money to create a better world. A world of righteousness and justice for all God's creatures. Never lose sight of the fact that your true end is as citizen of this glorious kingdom. And ask yourself, every day, "Am I serving God or wealth?" Because you can't serve both.