

FIRST LESSON: Amos 8:4-7
SECOND LESSON: Luke 16:1-13
September 18, 2022

“The Problem with Money”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A well-dressed man visited a church and asked to see the pastor's wife, who was well known for her charity. As he spoke to her he said in a voice breaking with emotion, “I'd like to draw your attention to the terrible plight of a poor family in this neighborhood. The father is dead, the mother is too ill to work, and the nine children are starving. They are about to be turned out into the cold streets unless someone pays their \$800 rent that is past due.”

“How dreadful!” exclaimed the pastor's wife. “May I ask who you are?”

The visitor wiped his eyes with his handkerchief and wailed, “I'm their landlord.”

And they say charity begins at home.

This little parable that we read this morning about money has got to be one of the most controversial parables that Jesus ever told. At face value it looks like Jesus is approving of a corrupt man acting out of raw self-interest. There is no downplaying it. This is NOT a good guy. We start by hearing that the manager has wasted his boss's money and possessions. He has lived the good life, what today might take the form of padded expense accounts, private jets and fancy vacations. We've seen this kind of person exposed in our world, usually when the stockholders get wind of what he's actually been doing. Understandably, the owner calls this man in and fires him. But he is not fired immediately. He has a short time left on the job before a replacement can be found.

So what does he do? In this society, reciprocity is key. You don't NOT return a favor. If someone does you a good turn you are absolutely obliged to do them a good turn. It's not like today when the recipient could suddenly develop memory loss. So this man turns to his employer's debtors, knowing that if he helps them they will be obligated to help him in the future.

This is not a small business situation. The numbers Jesus quotes are large. These are all wealthy people in their own right. The size of the harvests shows that these men are involved in large scale farming. A hundred *batos* of olive oil is about 900 gallons of olive oil which could only come from a very large olive grove. We can infer from the story that the land was leased from the rich man and that 900 gallons would be 50% of the total harvest. But the manager tells him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.”

The next man owed 1000 bushels of wheat. A *cor*, which is the Greek measurement used, is approximately 10-15 bushels, so this man owed between 1000 and 1500 bushels of wheat, about twenty times the amount an ordinary family plot would yield. We are speaking about a large commercial enterprise, and once more, the land is probably leased and what is owed is 50% of the total. This time the corrupt manager gives a 20% discount, telling the man to take the bill and make it 800.

Now this corrupt manager is smart. He is not actually stealing the money for himself. He's giving huge discounts. And he knows he will get away with it because when the rich man finds out he won't be able to back out of the deal without losing face in society. He will have to honor what his corrupt manager has done. He will be praised for being generous all the while cursing under his breath.

Of course, everyone in this story looks bad—the rich man, the corrupt manager and the agricultural businessmen who gladly accepted their windfall. They would know that by accepting the discounts they obligated themselves to the manager to do him good in return, but it was well worth the price.

The shocking part of the story is that the master commends the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly. But before we jump to the conclusion that God commends corrupt financial dealings, that is not really the point. Jesus is speaking about the use of money. Money is only good for what it can bring. Do we use it to bring more friends to faith, or use it for self-indulgence? Jesus says, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." In other words, use it to help other people!

Clarity comes with how this parable is concluded. Jesus says, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" It is striking to note that how we handle money in this world will determine how much responsibility we are given in the next. What follows this life is apparently not a lot of lying around on clouds with harps. God the creator is infinitely creative. We don't know what we will be doing, but it's not nothing. That would be boring, and it is not in the nature of God to be boring.

Going back to money Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." Or to put this in plain terms, we can't turn right and left at the same time. It's one or the other.

A striking example of using wealth for the greater good occurred this week. The founder of Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard (pronounced yuh-vaan shwee-naard), is giving his three-billion dollar company away. Chouinard was born a Catholic and became a Buddhist. At 84 years old he recognizes that the planet is in trouble. Patagonia, for those of you don't know, makes top grade outdoor apparel. It will now be in the hands of a trust and a nonprofit organization, and all future profits will be donated to help fight climate change. Chouinard said, "Instead of extracting value from nature and transforming it into wealth, we are using the wealth Patagonia creates to protect the source.

We're making Earth our only shareholder.” He decided against selling the company and donating the money, because he had no idea what a future owner would do. For the same reason he resisted making it a publicly traded entity where stockholders would demand profits. The only stockholder, according to Chouinard, is the earth.

What is wrong with us as Christians that we too cannot be that free from our money? Who gives away a three-billion-dollar company? A man who cares about a future he will never live to see. Money is a resource, nothing more. How we use this resource is what matters.

Many of the parables of Jesus point to the fact that status in this world is a fleeting thing. Regardless of where we put ourselves in society’s pecking order, it is possible to lose it all. The people of Pakistan have lost one-third of their country. Victims of the many forest fires around the world have watched all their worldly possessions go up in smoke. The man in our story who once had power because of his position as manager was about to lose it all and be dependent on the kindness of others. Without being aware of it, we all do put our trust in things like homes and jobs, the very things that can easily disappear.

How we deal with money is the true barometer of our faith, because money very easily usurps the place of God. It becomes our security. And we are all prone to this, myself included. We become anxious about money, always concerned that we will have enough. But if our money is not really our money at all, but God’s, then things can change. If we are not owners but rather managers our anxiety lessens because we know that it is God who will provide. And I can tell you from very personal and repeat experience that God does provide every time.

We are a small congregation, and it’s all hands-on-deck. When we give to the ministry of this church we are affirming that we trust God to take care of us as individuals and as the family of God. When we give what we should to support our congregation and help those in need in our neighborhood and around the world, there is always enough. Money threatens to be our master. We don’t have to let it do so. We can make money a servant, a resource to accomplish God’s will. Amen.

Amos 8:4-7

⁴ Hear this, you who trample the needy
and do away with the poor of the land,

⁵ saying,

“When will the New Moon be over
that we may sell grain,
and the Sabbath be ended
that we may market wheat?”—
skimping on the measure,
boosting the price

and cheating with dishonest scales,
6 buying the poor with silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
selling even the sweepings with the wheat.
7 The Lord has sworn by himself, the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget
anything they have done.

Luke 16:1-13

16 Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ² So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.'

³ "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— ⁴ I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.'

⁵ "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

⁶ "Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

"The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.'

⁷ "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'

"A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

"He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'

⁸ "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

¹⁰ "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

¹³ "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."