

Rev. Sarah Currie
Wimberley UMC
Sermon Notes for Sunday, Sept. 19, 2010
Scriptures: 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13
Title: "We are What (and Whom) We Serve"

Last week we saw Jesus exploring lost wandering sheep, fumbled coins, and even erratic sons, and we heard God say to us: "Although you may get lost in any number of ways, I can find anyone." This week, we hear the tale of a wealthy man and his double-dealing financial manager and wonder if God's reach extends to those who have been blinded by wealth, or the search thereof.

The manager, having squandered a chunk of his master's significant fortune, finds himself facing a bleak situation. He's going to be fired, it seems, and if he had the gift of management (and apparently he might not), he had not acquired many other skills along the way. One leverage point remains, however; the manager sees he has the power to lessen or even eliminate the debt of his master's debtors before he has to give "an accounting" of his management to his master, thereby securing himself a few friends for the future, when he will undoubtedly be unemployed. Surprisingly, the manager is then praised by his master for acting "shrewdly", as well as by Jesus, who is both narrating the story and preparing to enter into a series of teachings related to honesty and wealth.

This is a difficult parable—if not for first-century ears then at the very least for us moderns—and really, really tough for us baby boomers and Gen-Xers, for whom prosperity has become inextricably woven in with our sense of worthiness Post World War II. In those boom times, being prosperous got melded with notions of being blessed.

How could the master praise the manager when he had lost so much? Even if the manager had only lessened or eliminated his own commission when he adjusted the debt of the master's customers (which some scholars have reasoned is what happened), the master's property has still been "squandered."

And how could Jesus follow the parable by saying, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone,

they may welcome you into the eternal homes”? Is Jesus endorsing the behavior of the manager, suggesting that his followers secure the future for themselves by dishonest means?

And here, my friends, is one of many places in scripture, and in the teachings of Jesus, where anything like literalism utterly breaks down. Jesus was a Rabbinical scholar and teacher, in a time when Judaism had become informed by Greek philosophy—so irony, paradox, indirection, and dialectical conundrum were commonplace. Such is life—such is the human mind—such is the richness of the learning, maturing journey into the wisdom of God.

Think about it---talk about it—listen about it—midrash it—and when you’re done, you may be left with more questions than answers—you may be left with a way of thinking about the path ahead. Guided by Grace, in the company of other seekers after wisdom, you may also be left with more insight into different points of view, with more humility, with less judgement—with a more mature, compassionately faithful point of view.

Simplicity....real wisdom....doesn’t negate intellectual depth.

There are many, many ways to read Scripture, and live life, but one thing seems clear when we encounter these head-scratchers—God intends for us to apply our intellect to growing in our faith— to use our noggins, and get our noggins together. to learn, to think deeply, listen well, and know that the more we grow, the more we know we do not know. My mom used to tell me that, and wow, one more time, my mom was right. The very wisest among us are those who recognize they’re never done learning, evolving, growing in the faith.

Jesus is somewhat confounding here, but not because he is giving a wholehearted endorsement of the wealthy and their managers. Jesus goes on to imply that the master’s wealth was “filthy” in the first place, and we know from other passages that all wealth presents some sort of difficulty in Jesus’ eyes, hence his unsettling statement that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God—very confusing image for us kids, right? Camels can’t possibly go through needle eyes—so rich people can’t ever go to heaven? No. Context is

everything—the needle’s eye was a gate in the wall around Jerusalem---camels had to get unloaded, in order to pass through—there again, literalism and a failure to read these stories in context, robs us of much of their richness).

True to Jesus’ point, it does seem that the manager had a hard time behaving morally in the first place. So accustomed was he to money and possessions, and not about to consider other options like finding another line of employment or asking a friend for a loan or a gift (ah, humility, that most basic and most elusive of Christian values—the ability to admit one might be wrong, and even worse, that one might need help!)—he gets pulled down a slippery slope upon which one self-assured if dishonest deed follows another—in order to maintain what he thinks he must have—a certain amount of wealth.

Jesus was a very smart man—so he no doubt could understand the power of wealth and the wealthy to alter the world—for good or for ill. His ministry was underwritten and made possible by the assistance and support of numerous wealthy patrons—as was Paul’s ministry.

Certainly, he asked the disciples to drop what they were doing immediately and follow him, and we know at least one well-to-do person walked away from him sorrowfully when told that to follow Jesus would mean to give up everything and come away. We have to imagine there were still others.

Still, as a good Jew, Jesus would have known that the teachings of his Jewish faith did not demonize wealth but made the wealthy morally obligated to help the less fortunate. Moreover, in Luke Jesus calls the wealthy not to burn their money to cinders but to be “rich toward God” instead of storing up treasures for themselves.

And in the parable that directly follows this one in Luke, Jesus depicts a wealthy man being tormented in Hades because he did not use all of his “good things” to help Lazarus the beggar, to whom poverty had brought nothing but “evil things.”

Lots of thinking, and talking, and praying, and dialoging, and then acting to do, on this walk of faith, right?

And over the years I've gone round and round in my own mind, and in dialogue with others over this and other teachings of Jesus, about how much is too much, and how rich is too rich, and what's moral, and right, and responsible, and in line with God's will.

Oprah, Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, and many other less famous but no less generous folks, have done great good with their considerable resources—good they couldn't have done, had they not been wealthy. Then there are the Donald Trumps (well, there's only one Donald Trump, thank goodness)—the Gordon Gecko (Wall Street) “Greed is good” guys, whose sense of freedom is that more is better, and wealth for wealth's sake is somehow a God-given right....too bad for the rest of you.

No definitives or absolutes here. What I believe is true, though, what this teaching of Jesus seems to be saying to us today, is that we can become wedded to “stuff”—material, consumable stuff that we believe we need---when in fact, what we really need is to conserve and channel our energies in the direction of things that matter—like, how do we relate to what he have, in spiritual terms?

Everything belongs to God....
“We give Thee but Thine Own,
Whate'er the Gift may be,
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from thee.”

That means our private, personal resources.
That means our family/inherited resources.
That means our congregational/church resources.
That means our tax-allocated resources.

They're all God's already—which means they're already designated funds, as it were—intended for the greater good of the whole family....and it's a very big family.

Our resources, our treasures, extend far beyond, and far deeper than monetary gifts.

There's our holy energy....our holy attentiveness...

Our holy focus.

Maybe this is what Jesus is encouraging his friends to remember. We are his friends, right? I mean, we sing “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.....”

But aren't we really called to be his friends....in thought, word, and deed? Isn't real friendship a reciprocal relationship?

“What Gift Can We Bring”

“What can I give Him, poor as I am.....if I were a wise man, I would do my part, but what I can, I give Him....give my heart.”

So, our treasure really consists in our consciousness....

And aren't we called to be shrewd, and smart, about how we focus, and direct, and channel that priceless, holy human lifeline?

Retired Admiral Thad Allen, the coordinator of the horrendous BP disaster clean-up effort, has a tip for us:

Responding to a question by an interviewer as to how he manages to fend off criticism, and stay so remarkably balanced, he said (and my husband John has been reminding me of this lately, good spousely coach and friend that he is):

“I'm very careful who I rent out space in my head to.”

The manager, dishonest or calculating or whatever, doesn't own the resources, the riches, the wealth.

Neither do we.

What gets the manager in trouble is that he confuses his own short-sighted sense of self-preservation for what's really in his best interests—serving the behest of his master, read “the Master.”

And how easy it is to lose our way, in this regard---except it's not hard to stay the course, if we do some things along the way, to remember whose wealth it is, anyway....

Start, center, remember, and end our day in prayer.

(Many traditions incorporate ritualized, set-aside times of prayer—and some even worship every day!). Determine alone and together how to devote a portion of who we are, and what we have, to loving service to neighbors in need, to causes worthy of our care.

The wealth of our holy human awareness, our God-given consciousness....let's be very careful who we rent out space in our head to... 'cause our hearts are open season...

“Open hearts, open minds, open doors”...what the heck does that mean?

It's an ideal....and a good one.

And our practice toward achieving something like the ideal Begins right here, right now.... service begins at home.

We can't be for the world what we cannot practice being right here, right now...

Stewards of the Gift that we don't deserve, cannot earn, and yet have received, freely.....

Grace its own self....God's completely unconditional, mercifully righteous, and righteously merciful love.

Who is in a position to condemn?

Only Christ.

And God “so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting Life.

God sent his son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

Let's do our part to be shrewd and savvy stewards, forgiven, loved, and free, to the honor and glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

and for the healing and wholeness of our brothers and sisters everywhere...even here.

Amen.