

15th Sunday after Pentecost September 22 2019 Sermon

Amos 8:4-7 Luke 16:1-13

We are in the third year of our Capital Campaign- Growing to Give. Along with asking for financial support to reduce our debt related to this wonderful new building (and it's not too late to participate!) we also have a different focus each year. The first year was growing in Faith towards God. Last year it was growing in Love towards one another. This year the focus is growing in Generosity to all. So, what does that mean exactly?

Well you know me, and I go to the language first. There are a number of different words in the Greek that get translated as generosity or generous. But they all paint a similar picture. In our text on the banner from Galatians it means something like being a living example of the ideals of the Spirit in everyday life. Its root is goodness. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians it means something like simplicity or singleness. To be so focused on one thing, generally outward focused, to the exclusion of other things. As one definition put it, it means an openness of heart shown through good deeds to others.

I'm sure all of us can think of examples of this kind of generosity. The person who is willing to let you use their truck to move your kid to school. It's the person who always picks up the tab at dinner. It's the person who will drop everything to help a neighbor, friend, or stranger in need. Who will go out in the middle of the night to help with a flat tire, or watch your kids at the drop of a hat. Who will come over to give you a hand moving that piece of furniture you can't lift on your own.

These are all good deeds from those who focus on one thing, the good of the other person. They do not let anything get in the way of the relationship between them and someone else, not money, not time. Why? Because these things, while precious commodities, are secondary to the relationship they have with other people. Because they recognize that people are more important than anything else. And in so recognizing and living out that value...they are generous.

The text we have today from Jesus can be confusing. Is Jesus applauding the dishonest manager for his cheating?! What does Jesus mean that we should “make friends by means of dishonest wealth”?

Scholars over the ages have a hard time coming to a consensus on what this all might mean. But as for the last, I appreciate Bishop Michael Rinehart’s understanding, “Use your filthy, stinkin’ money to do some good in this life, so that in the next the poor will vouch for you.”

Short, sweet, and to the point. But, if you look at what Jesus has been teaching us so far in the Gospel of Luke it fits, doesn’t it? Jesus talks about the rich, those who are fully resourced, at least 11 times in the Gospel of Luke and it never seems to turn out well for them, does it? We heard about the rich man who built new barns to house his wealth and then when he died was reminded that all that wealth did him no good. You can’t take it with you. Jesus, just a few weeks ago was criticizing the Pharisee for who he invited to his banquet because he only invited those who would invite him back, who would be a good investment for him. In another few weeks,

we'll hear Jesus tell us it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

There is one thing Jesus constantly points out. That money/possessions/wealth gets in the way of human relationships. That his calling from the beginning (and our calling as followers of Jesus) is to raise up the poor, the lowly, those who are on the fringes of society. Who are not fully resourced.

This focus on the poor and their welfare is a longstanding concern for God. Look at our text from the Prophet Amos who warns those living in the Northern Jewish Kingdom of Israel that God will not forget how they have trampled on the needy and ruined the poor of the land for their own gain. Indeed, this kind of neglect and exploitation of the poor is the very reason calamity falls upon that kingdom. For in neglecting the least of these in their midst, they neglect God. And God says there will be consequences for this.

Now, issues of wealth and poverty are complex and expand well beyond the stereotypes we carry of each group. I think we all can appreciate that. But, as one commentator put it, Luke understands that anxiety about money is a disease among both those who have it and those who do not. It infects their lives and relationships. In a very real way, wealth and possessions become a living thing that gets between us and others.

Have you ever had a friendship with someone who has had much more or much less wealth than you? Did their wealth or lack of it ever get in the

way of the relationship? Become something you were very aware of? I had a conversation with someone who said they had tried this several times and that it always failed because they could not afford to “keep up” with the other person. I asked whether they felt like it would have also gotten in the way if their friend had been the one financing their adventures. The honest answer was, yes, it would have been a blow to their pride to have that happen. Wealth and our relationship to it gets in the way of our relationship with one another, even when it is not explicitly brought up.

However, this commentator believes Luke is pointing out that a generous sharing of one’s goods can free you from the danger to the soul that lies coiled in the possession of things. Because the question to ask is always, “Do I possess this thing, or does it possess me?” This kind of thinking pops up for those of us who are less well resourced when your car goes kaput and you’ve got to figure out how to afford the repair and still pay your other bills, but it also comes up when those who have more stuff find they need to work harder just to keep what they have. In both cases, our stuff possesses us, it drives us and what we do.

What Luke points out through this conversation with Jesus is that how one handles riches will have eternal consequences.

I have mentioned it before, but I think more than anything Jesus calls for us to make sure that we have the right priorities in regard to our relationship with money. I think you can have wealth and not be possessed by it. Warren Buffet comes to mind. I haven’t studied him deeply, but from what I’ve seen over the years, this man who is worth \$82 billion does not let his wealth get between him and others. You get a sense of his relationship

with his wealth when you find out he has pledged to give away 99% of his fortune. When you find out he lives in the same house in Omaha that he bought in 1958.

Our text asks, can you be faithful with this dishonest, this unjust wealth? I believe Jesus is pointing to an answer of yes. A faithful use of this wealth is to share it with those who do not have wealth. Who are not fully resourced. A faithful use is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give water to the thirsty and shelter to the poor. A faithful use is to free them from their debt. A faithful use is one that does not let your wealth, or lack thereof, get between you and your relationships with your fellow human beings. Certainly, that it does not get between you and your relationship with God.

Wealth, in the Jewish imagination, is not good or evil. It just is. It is us, who change it into something else. It is us who turn it into another god, the one who we fear, love, and trust the most. The thing we think having enough of will save us. And this is idolatry, because we know that only God saves.

My siblings in Christ, our struggles with wealth, especially for us who are so much more wealthy by comparison with the rest of the world, is difficult. There are no clear formulas to follow in this. Just give x amount away and your good! But I think Jesus gives us good tools in some of the questions that get raised. Questions like, Do I possess my wealth/ my stuff, or does it possess me? Do I hold my resources with an open hand, ready to share with a generous heart, focused on others, or do I hold it tight...afraid to lose

any of it? When I think about giving it away, how does it make me feel? Does my wealth or lack of it get in the way of my relationships with others?

We do not struggle with these things because that will make God love us more. We struggle with these things, because God so loved us that he sent Jesus Christ to save us from ourselves. From our bondage to sin and death. Our bondage to stuff, riches, to believing we can save ourselves.

We struggle with it, because Jesus came so that we might see a way to life fuller and more abundant. A life that is filled with joy. A life free from worry that pulls us apart. A life secure in the knowledge that when things get lean, God will act through the Body of Christ to help us get by. A life secure in the knowledge that God will always provide us with enough, and that sometimes we are the means by which someone gets enough because we are generous with our abundance.

We struggle with these things because God was generous with God's Son. So focused on God's relationship with us that even Jesus was not too much to give. Because Jesus was generous with himself towards us. Imagine that. God so loved you, Jesus so loved you (in all the messiness of your life) that he felt it was a good bargain to die so that you might live.

As we let this text sit with us this week. As we think about our relationship with people and with our wealth. As we consider God's immense love and generosity for us, as shown to us in this meal we will share. As we hear about in the Word read and proclaimed. Let us pray for God's help to grow in our generosity for all people. So that everyone might have enough.