

15h Sunday after Pentecost September 18 2022

Luke 16:1-13

Is being rich, or as the Greek phrases it- fully resourced, evil? Is wealth or money bad?

Within the Jewish tradition, the answer is no. Wealth, money, economics are necessary things to human life. In and of themselves, they are not bad or good. However, the systems that grow up around those things can be evil. They can be sinful, because they are lived out in ways that are contrary to God's commands for how we live with one another.

The prophet Amos speaks God's word of warning to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. If you continue in your corrupt business practices (using tweaked weights to measure grain, selling food in measurements that are smaller than they should be all to increase profits), if you trample on the needy and ruin the poor, if the Sabbath for you is nothing more than an inconvenient impediment in your making a buck, God will see and does not forget.

There are consequences for your actions. Simply observing the day of Sabbath is not enough if the justice and mercy exemplified by the Sabbath does not shape everyday life—your behavior in the marketplace, on the street, and at the gate of the city. Wealth is not evil, economics are not sinful, but a system that is unjust to the poor and needy, to those who are most vulnerable is.

The Gospel of Luke uses the word rich (fully resourced) eleven times, more than any other gospel. It tends to have a negative connotation, not because of the riches themselves, but because of what they tend to evoke from the one who is well resourced. We'll see more on that next week. However, Jesus does not say that economics or money itself are evil, he does point out how having an abundance of wealth and the pursuit of wealth can lead to unjust ways of being.

The parable Jesus tells is one that can be difficult to parse. The rich man is actually pretty peripheral to the story. But the manager, is Jesus actually commending the manager for cheating his master? And asking us to do the same? What is he really talking about here. It's unclear. Based on their research even some commentators think the author of Luke finds it problematic. What is clear is that final statement- you cannot serve both God and wealth/money/mamon.

We are conditioned to read parables such that a manager or ruler is God. I would invite us, particularly this time, to look through another lens. The commentator Mark Davis suggests that the parables Jesus tells are often a description of the way things are in the kingdom of the world, but they are told to contrast that with how things should be for those of us who live under the reign of God.

One thing I think Jesus is doing in this parable is pointing out not only how unjust the economic system is, but also how unreliable. We all know this unreliability don't we. Especially if we lived through the Great Recession of 2007 – 2009. We know that relying on our wealth to help us live is tricky.

How many saw the value of their homes go up in smoke almost overnight? How many who were doing okay suddenly find themselves without shelter because the car suddenly stops working, and you lose your job because you can't get to work. I remember hearing stories during the recession of a woman living in a shelter who, because she relied on public transportation and her own two feet, literally would take all day to apply for one job. She wanted desperately to work, but because she didn't have a job, she couldn't get one.

Even the manager knows that the system he is engaged in is unreliable. The language used is vague enough that you could read it that the manager telling the rich man's debtors to take something off what they owe is not his response to being fired, but rather something he had already done and was the reason he got fired. In other words, he knew at some point his time would be up and so the relationships he built were what would save him.

That the economic system was not ultimately trustworthy can also be seen in even more vague language that means you could read that the accusations which cost the manager his position are false. So, the economic system would certainly be unjust in that he lost his job just because somebody said he was cheating. Either way it is certainly a system that is not trustworthy in the long term.

Perhaps the parable is meant to make a contrast, between serving wealth (which has no guarantees of being there when you most need it) and serving God. A contrast between serving a system that in this form is

fundamentally unjust and unsound, or trusting in relationships. Because that is what the manager ultimately relies on, that the relationships he has built as the manager will save him when the system fails.

Who do we serve? God or wealth? Who is our Lord/Master?

To help me figure that out I ask the question, which one makes me jump?

Which one do I react to when it asks something of me?

You could make this tension clearer if you think about it in terms of money or relationships. Which is more important? The gathering of money, wealth, being fully resourced- or being rich in relationships built through care for our neighbor? Which we remember from the parable of the Merciful Samaritan our neighbor is one who is in need, or the one who helps us when we are in need. Which of those things makes us jump? Which is more important? Making a buck or giving one away to someone in need? Which makes us jump? Because you cannot serve God and wealth.

Jesus does not say wealth is bad or you cannot serve God and have wealth. But Jesus is very clear (especially in Luke) that having wealth, being fully resourced, can make following Jesus very difficult. Wealth is one of those things that we as humans do a good job of making into a god. The thing we fear, love, and trust the most. How we measure success in life. The thing we serve, devote our lives to. And remember, Jesus is very clear... you cannot serve God and wealth. There is a choice to make here.

What saves, what we can trust will always be there, is God. Who loved us enough to send us Jesus, God's own Son. Jesus, who sat at table with everyone, rich and poor, righteous and sinners, and who called all to repent- change their thinking- and follow after him and live as members of God's household and citizens of the reign of God. To trust that what will save us is a not nice 401K, but God- particularly the God who comes to us in relationships with our fellow human beings. The God whose hands and feet are those of our fellow members of St. John who celebrate our joys, who surround us when we are hurting, crying, in pain. Who will feed us if we are hungry, shelter us if we are in need, who will cloth us if we are naked. Who embody for us God's undeserved and unending love.

The reign of God is defined in the Hebrew Scriptures and exemplified by Jesus as one in which the most vulnerable- widows, orphans, the poor and needy, the alien in our land are cared for. That they have daily bread. Enough to eat and drink, adequate shelter and clothes. A reign where the economic system is rooted in the ethics of God which has a bias to mercy, grace, and relationship.

You cannot serve God and wealth. When I run my test, which makes me jump. I am ashamed to admit it sometimes is the wealth. I am more motivated to work hard at making a buck than I am at making a relationship. Yet, I have also worked hard through my adult life to repent- (remember what that means) change my thinking to better follow Jesus. I have had good role models for this. Including my mother in terms of relationships with people and my father in terms of generosity with money.

You cannot serve God and wealth. What will last, is ultimately trustworthy, is the relationships we are called into by God. As parent, child, sibling, spouse. As friend and neighbor. Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving others as we love ourselves. As the prophet Amos points out, this call is not just for Sunday or in our private lives but guides our behavior when we are in the workforce at school, when we are buying and selling, when we are at home and away.

Through our baptism we enter into the household of God and are called and equipped to make faithful use of our wealth and follow Jesus on his mission to bring release to the captives, to bring good news to the poor, to fill the hungry with good things. Called to invest ourselves in the relationships we have with God and with each other so that we might have life fuller and more abundant than what we can bring for ourselves.

That's the life I so yearn to live. That I strive to live. That is the life we come here each week to practice, to become better at. To sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his words. To sit at the table with Jesus and our neighbors and eat with him. To spend time with other members of God's household, to hear their stories, delight in their joys, cry with them in their sorrows. To go out into the world transformed people, equipped and ready to speak for and live out justice and mercy for all people.

O Lord, we strive to serve you. Make of us your hands and feet, let your justice and mercy flow through us to all whom we meet. That they might know your saving grace.