

16th Sunday after Pentecost September 25 2022

1 Timothy 6:6-19 and Luke 16:19-31

The Israelites must have been stunned. In a short amount of time they went from being slaves to Pharaoh, subject to the whims of their Egyptian masters to living as a free people- wandering nomads in the wilds of the Sinai Peninsula.

While that freedom was welcome, it had to be jarring. Long held practices, hard lessons learned from slavery would have carried over into their new lives. It would probably have included hoarding of food and water, a “look out for yourself and your own” attitude. One brought on by the privations of their slavery- perhaps learned from watching their masters.

God knew this, knew that the Israelites would need to be reminded of who they were and how to live as the people of God’s household, not Pharaoh’s. So, God set before them 10 commandments. Or another way to think about it is ten disciplines. These disciplines were in place to help reshape their attitudes, beliefs, and practices to better conform to what it means to live as part of the household of God. Eventually, this outer discipline would shape their inner being.

Another practice God imposed was that of the manna. Each morning, members of a family would go and collect the manna that had appeared on the ground of the wilderness around them and make sweet and filling cakes from it. They were to collect only enough to feed the family for the day. Anyone remember what happened if (other than on the day before the

Sabbath) anyone tried to take extra? It spoiled, turned rotten, and filled with maggots.

The discipline that came from this was to remember that it was God who provided daily bread. And that God would always provide enough. That to mistrust that promise and trying to collect more than enough was tantamount to lack of faith in God and would lead to the loss of the excess anyway.

Once the Israelites entered into the promised land after a generation and there was no more manna, God instilled a new discipline- that God would still provide enough for everyone through the bounty of the promised land, but that it would come through their hands. That if they had excess, they were to feed, clothe, and shelter those in their lands who had no power, no resources. To make sure that everyone had enough. The poor, the widows, orphans, those who were strangers in their land-immigrants, travelers.

Jesus continues that teaching in his own ministry.

Last week there were consequences for those who used deceitful business practices, who steal through those practices and break the 7th commandment. There are warnings to those who are rich, who are not content with food, clothing, shelter, and their ability to be in right relationship with God. This week we have 1 Timothy and the warning that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and how, in their eagerness to be rich, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains- even if the sting isn't felt right away. A

warning that the excess will turn rotten, and they're just going to lose it anyway because you can't take it with you when you die.

The intent of the disciplines God sets before those of us who live in God's household, is to help orient us into right relationship with God and with each other. In the case of the excess we have, our riches, (and friends, let me be clear- even though we may struggle in our context at times-by any measure- compared to the majority of the rest of the world- we in the United States have an embarrassment of excess of clothes, shelter, food, and other stuff- such that the self-storage industry is worth \$40 billion in the US)... in the case of our excess, our devotion to that excess and attaining it- can lead us to become blind to those in need around us. It can lead us to love riches, excess, wealth more than we love God and love our neighbor. I imagine we all can think of stories or people we know to see this is true. And how do those stories normally end?

As the first commandment and Jesus both state, we are to love God alone, with all our heart soul mind and strength- with everything we have and are. And we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Like our own flesh.

God rescued the Israelites, not because of anything they had done but rather because they were God's chosen, because God had made a promise to them long ago. God's love for us is not bought- it is given freely. It comes to us as Jesus would have had the rich man do for Lazarus- a grace filled gift given because it could be.

Like God did with the Israelites, we have available to us a spiritual discipline related to our wealth. This is not money is evil- give it to us. It is

one discipline by which you practice orienting your life to where it belongs- God above all others. God not wealth. A practice that God has instilled in God's people from the beginning of time. A practice that properly orients them towards their wealth and God.

That practice is first fruits giving to God.

From the beginning you offer God what is best of your abundance- your best grapes, your best lamb, your best grain. You give to God first- a discipline that reminds us who ultimately provides all that we have and orients us to love of God and love of neighbor, not money and the making of it.

Now, scripture says, God loves a cheerful giver, and that is certainly how God wants us to feel about this practice because it means we are in proper orientation as members of God's household. But as in most cases, God will work with those who give through duty, who give as a discipline or spiritual practice. The inner change will come through the outer practice.

One expression of this discipline of first fruits giving is the practice of percentage giving. It is a practice we embody through our stewardship campaign and the invitation to make an estimate of your giving to the mission and ministry of St. John over the course of the year.

We invite members of this household of God into this discipline because when you practice it- it will change your faith. It will re-orient you to love of God with all that you are and love of neighbor as yourself. It is a spiritual practice.

The rich man of this parable has lost that orientation. Lazarus is probably sitting on a bench outside his gate, a bench that was present at all such houses and where those who are poor would sit. Even aside from what the Hebrew Bible says, the societal norms of the day would expect someone like the rich man to give something to those at the gate, especially if you are feasting multiple times in a day. Yet, the rich man doesn't even seem to see Lazarus. He knows about him, but there is no orientation towards him as one created in the image of God. Instead, he tells Abraham to command Lazarus to go dip his finger in the water to cool his tongue. Lazarus is just another lowling to do his bidding.

I have followed a discipline of first fruits giving, of percentage giving, over the last 20 years of my adult life. It has mainly been oriented to supporting the mission and ministry of the congregation I belong to. But it also is expressed in how I have responded to many asks that I am privileged to deal with as one who is called to ministry in the church.

I have found both things to be challenging, but also so beneficial to my faith life. When I trust God enough to give to the mission and ministry of the church off the top and in an amount that stretches me a bit. That asks something of me. I have found that there is still always enough for my daily needs. Partly, that may be because my understanding of what I need, what is enough, has been changed over time by this discipline.

That has been helped by the calling I have which puts me into contact with those who do not have enough. The poor, the homeless, those who are going through a rough patch, and those who just can't seem to get it all together. I have seen people who are probably gaming the system, but so

many more who are working so hard and just can't get enough. In them, I recognize how privileged I am and how easily that could be my plight. I strive to see in them a beloved child of God who is in need of daily bread and God has given me the honor to be the one to provide it. Or at least to point them to where they can receive it.

Let's be honest, the conversation around money in the church is complicated, nuanced, and fraught. Especially when the pastor is doing it because where does my salary come from.

But we cannot avoid it because Jesus, especially in the Gospel of Luke is right there. Remember, it is not that wealth or an excess of it is evil in and of itself. But both having and pursuing more than enough is dangerous. It can lead to so many things that pull us away from love of God and love of neighbor. It can lead us out of the household of God. So, God has given us this command, this discipline of first fruits giving. Of generosity so that others might have enough.

You are members of the household of God. Made so through the grace of God in Jesus Christ and in the waters of baptism- not because of anything you did but because God in Jesus saw your need. Saw that you were in bondage and freed you. Freed you from everything else so that you could love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. So that you might live, as a member of God's household, a life fuller and more abundant than any life lived according to the rules of this world.

Gathered into God's household we give thanks to God for that freedom. We celebrate all that God has first given us. And we strive through disciplines like first fruits giving to continue to grow in faith towards God

and love of one another. So that we might see those who sit at the door of this household of God, outside our businesses, on the side of the road and make sure they have daily bread. So that all might be fed and freed to love God with all that they are and love one another. So that we might be one in the Household of God.