

19th Sunday after Pentecost October 8 2023

Matthew 21:33-46

If you had to name something that was your most favorite, that made your life the best, what would it be? Share with those around you.

What were those things.

What did you notice about what most people responded with? Most are probably things. Because we're trained to think that way in our culture. The accumulation of stuff. The latest gadget, game, phone, car.

And ultimately, whose things are these? Are these things (homes, cars, toys, games) ours? Really? Those of us who are older, but even some who are younger, know what happens over time. When our interests change, or life circumstances change, or we die. Do those things go with us? They don't even stay within our family. Just ask older adults who are trying to pass on several sets of china to their kids or grandkids.

All things come from and belong to God. God is the one who created all that exists and so ultimately, it is God's. We are just stewards, caretakers, tenant farmers. We enjoy the benefits of

what God has created. We can take those resources and make amazing and wonderful things. This is, perhaps, part of what it means to be created in the image of God. Something that exists in us as human beings that does not (at this level) in other creatures. That we can create. An echo of God's own creation. But if we begin to think that it is ours, that we can do whatever we want with it. That's when things go off the rails. Check out Genesis 3.

This parable of Jesus reminds us that this vineyard, this world is not ours, it is a trust. We are just stewards of this gift. One of the things we have learned over the summer is that the reign of God always orients us towards relationship with others. And to trust that God will always provide daily bread, no matter what. This is the promise of the story of manna in the wilderness. What we pray for in the Lord's Prayer.

It is stewardship campaign time again. You might be wondering, why the heck are we talking about money so much lately? Aren't we in the middle of a Capital Campaign? Why would you want to muddy the waters.

These are very legit questions.

First, the Capital Campaign and our annual Stewardship Campaign go hand in glove. We can have a wildly successful

Capital Campaign (we are already almost 2/3 of the way there! Thanks to you all) and reduce our monthly mortgage costs, but if we don't have the monthly giving to support our budget, still be making difficult decisions. We can have a wildly successful Stewardship Campaign and if the Capital Campaign falls short, still need to make some compromises to our mission and ministry.

Each campaign is necessary for the financial health of our congregation. That's the pragmatic truth of things.

Second, it is uncomfortable for pretty much everyone in this room to talk about money. Which is too bad, really, because Jesus talks about wealth and our relationship to it frequently.

Money is just a thing. A tool that we use to get daily bread in our society. But, too often, we give it an inflated position and importance. In the reign of God that we pray would come on earth as in heaven, if someone does not have money... do they not have food? Do they not have shelter? Clothes?

So why does that happen now? Why is money or the lack of it associated with whether you have these basic human needs? At least in the West.

Money in our society is associated with our work, our value, our smarts. I would almost guarantee that everyone in here, including me, has at some time said to themselves, "If I just had x amount of money, then I could relax. Everything would be okay."

Jesus' teachings about money are mostly geared towards exposing our unhealthy relationship to it. The reality of our trust in it to provide daily bread over God providing daily bread. Ultimately, we trust money to save us. Not God.

Thus, the rich young ruler goes away grieving when Jesus says to give away his riches and come follow him. He is in wrong relationship to money. When Jesus points to the widow who put two pennies into the offering (all that she had) and says she gave more than those who gave thousands because she made the gift trusting that God would provide for her. She is in right relationship to money. It's a thing. It's not everything.

Friends, I think whenever Jesus talks with us about money it is not about amounts, but it is about relationship. How we orient towards God and to our wealth. Which do we ultimately trust. Which is our god. The thing we fear, love, and trust the most.

In this way, our financial stewardship is about our relationship with God. And our relationship with each other. Because it shows that we trust what God has promised, that God will provide daily bread. And it shows what we have discovered, that sometimes, we are the means by which God provides daily bread for others.

The practice of giving to the mission and ministry of the church is a spiritual practice, because it helps us discover what our relationship with money truly is. It helps us be mindful of the ways in which we use the resources God has first given us. It orients us in right relationship with God who is source of all things.

I have found this to be the case. I knew my parents were regular and generous givers to the mission and ministry of St. Marks' Lutheran in Charlotte, NC. I was raised to give and when I had my own income, I gave some of that to the mission and ministry of the church- at least occasionally.

When I first entered my calling back in 1996 at St. James in Bettendorf, I knew that I needed to become more intentional in my giving. I remembered a stewardship sermon that the Rev. Bob Stackel preached about his own journey. Modeling myself on that sermon- I determined an amount I would give weekly, off

the top, from my income to the mission and ministry of St. James. An amount that would stretch me. Make me think about it. I figured what percentage of my income that amount was, and I committed myself to growing that amount by 1% each year.

In those early years, while there were times where I did have to hold off on some fun purchase, but I rather surprisingly found I never missed the funds that I gave away. And that has continued. Now, my financial situation has changed over the years, and that has affected what I have given to the mission and ministry of the church that I have attended. But my commitment has remained the same. And I have continued to find that God has provided for me and my family- even though I give that money away.

I have found that I hold my financial resources with an open hand, not a closed fist, and that I have not lacked for anything.

I would commend this spiritual practice to each of you. Because of what it can teach you about your own relationship with money. Your relationship with God. And to this community of faith.

It is not about the amount. It is about the discipline. The experience.

It is about trusting that God does not operate like the Chief Priests and Pharisees think the owner of the vineyard does. Extracting revenge upon the tenant farmers for stealing his produce. Killing his messengers and finally his son. Rather, God raises the son from the dead and offers those responsible mercy and grace. Daily bread.

As we have found time and again this past summer, God's reign is different from the way we have learned that things work. That God will build God's reign on the foundation of a stone that we have rejected. That God's strength looks like weakness. That God's justice is mercy and grace.

That God's desire is for everyone to share in the fruits of the vineyard. That we discover that when we do that, share from the bounty that God has provided, we find that there is not only enough, but more than enough. For all.

This is the discipline we are inviting you to enter into this fall. Both with our Capital Campaign, but also with your commitment to regular giving to the mission and ministry of St. John for 2024. To stretch yourself so that you might better see your own relationship to God, your wealth, and the world. To discover the truth that when we all pool our "little bit" that God will provide enough and more than enough from this beautiful creation.