

Sermon ✝ September 18, 2022

Luke 16:1-13

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In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells a story about a shady character who was commended for his immediate response to the situation at hand. It is a most curious parable and yet is very close to the reality of the human situation.

A story is told about Huey Long, the populist governor of Louisiana of the 1930's. The first time he campaigned in Southern Louisiana, Huey, who was from Protestant northern Louisiana, was taken aside by a local politician and reminded that he would be speaking to a lot of Catholic voters.

Throughout the day Huey told his audiences how as a boy he would get up at six o'clock on Sunday mornings, hitch the family horse to the buggy, and take his Catholic grandparents to Mass. After he brought them home, he would turn around and take his Baptist grandparents to church.

At the end of the day, a local politician complimented Huey and expressed his surprise at learning he had Catholic grandparents. To which Huey Long replied: *“Catholic grandparents! Are you kidding! Hell, we didn't even have a horse!”*

Unfortunately, over the years we have come to expect that sort of behavior from politicians. But at least if Long was lying, he was at least smart enough to make the right gesture. Likewise the dishonest steward made a gesture that was practical, it made the people feel better but still left them in debt. (Fifty jugs of oil was a year's production of 75 olive trees; 80 containers of wheat would require a year's harvest of 50 acres . . . and Palestine was not Iowa.) Still it made the people feel better. Jesus was not affirming the act of the steward, but he was impressed with his attitude, *“ . . . if only you could be so enthusiastic.”*

Jesus sets forth the “either/or” of discipleship. *“You cannot serve God and wealth”*. Following Jesus and continuing to secure oneself through possessions are irreconcilable. We cannot *squeeze* around this point if we are, indeed, serious about our Christianity.

This is the kind of lesson that can make us feel most uncomfortable as it hits us where we live ... in the pocketbook.

Lessons like this one from Luke 16, seem to conveniently appear in the lectionary at the very same time of the year when many congregations find themselves in the midst of their stewardship drives. Hmmm.

So . . . what of our relationship to wealth? In the King James, the phrase is, *“you cannot serve God and mammon.”* Mammon originally meant *“That in which one trusts”*. Its meaning evolved to signify wealth and riches.

It is ironic that on the back side of a U.S. dollar bill it still says, “*In God We Trust*”. It is ironic because many seem to have so much more faith in the dollar than in God.

Now a Christian should have a great interest in money . . . but that Christian should make his/her money a servant toward the greater interest . . . to be rich toward God.

Churches are not immune from misguided loyalties toward the wealth of this world. I recall the story of a wealthy suburban congregation that was trying to figure out what to do with their expensive sterling silver coffee service. There had been a rash of local burglaries and so the vestry convened a special meeting to discuss the issue. One suggestion was to hide the coffee service in the choir robe closet —behind the robes. Another vestry member thought they should build a special cabinet to hold their treasured coffee service but others were concerned about where they would hide the key for the cabinet. Finally, the priest spoke up, “*Why not sell the silver and use the money to feed the hungry.*” [Silence]. We get so attached to our stuff don’t we.

Our giving is our grateful response to a loving and forgiving God. And as I often say: good giving is simply a response to good ministry.

When people feel that their church is doing good works, that is, doing what it should do, they respond in kind.

If we really set our priorities in their proper order, it becomes difficult *not* to think of giving. It all depends on what motivates our day-to-day living: faith in God or faith in wealth.

And it's not just our motivation in the big, “showy” things but in the little things as well. Jesus tells us that we need to be faithful in the little things.

The memorials committee for a church in a small community ordered new drapes for a Sunday School classroom. When the order arrived, it was discovered that an extra pair had been included in the shipment. And, as luck would have it, the extra drapes fit perfectly on a previously undraped window.

The issue before the committee was whether to inform the store that they had received the extra pair by mistake and offer to pay for it.

One person suggested that since it was purchased from a store that was part of a large retail chain and not locally owned, there was no harm done to anyone in the community by not reporting. Another member stated that the computerized record systems of large retail stores were so complicated that it would only confuse the business to report the mistake.

Finally, an often silent member of the committee leaned forward to speak, “*If the church can't be trusted with little things, who will listen to us when we have something important to say?*” The committee voted to pay for the drapes.

The tension that exists between our devotion to God and our devotion to wealth is especially evident when we consider our faithfulness in the little things.

Today we have been asked to make a choice. We have been reminded that we need to choose between God and wealth. It is not an easy decision, but one that daily faces all of us.

As a congregation, we do pretty good. We support countless organizations locally, nationally and internationally.

May we continue to be faithful in the little things as well as the big.

And remember: *“No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other —no matter how much you try— you cannot serve God and wealth.”*