Malcolm Clemens Young Jeremiah 8:18--9:1

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2C37, K26 Psalm 79:1-9

15 Pentecost (Proper 20C) 11:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Eucharist 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Sunday 18 September 2022 Stewardship Sunday Luke 16:1-13

**Fear of Losing Everything**

*"No slave can serve two masters… You cannot serve God and wealth.” Luke 16*

I have been dwelling on Jesus’ parable about the fired manager over the last few months. In an instant the shock of losing everything seizes him. A sense of inadequacy, worthlessness and humiliation confronts us when we do not have enough to provide for those we love. This terror may be completely foreign to you, it may have come and gone in different stages of your life – or you may be in the grips of this fear now and have no idea how to ever escape from it.

We often talk about inequality without spelling out what it really means. In our society we tolerate a greater amount of insecurity and fear than in other advanced democracies. Not having adequate healthcare, housing, food, education and leisure time creates terrible and unnecessary suffering for millions. In America racism has always been part of this story. Treating some people as less than fully human has made us callous to the pain of others.

People often ask me a simple question that I never answer straightforwardly. “Why do your parents live in Florida?” The reason quite simply is that during the last years of his employment a younger woman was being abused by my father’s boss. My dad publicly stood up for her and as a result lost his job and the pension benefits that he desperately needed in his retirement. For every remaining year of his life he will continue to pay a substantial price for acting righteously. Their small Florida town is a cheap place to live.

Jesus’ story is similarly about a turning point in someone’s life. It is about a man forced to look back at his past as he faces an uncertain future. A manager caught squandering his boss’ wealth gets fired. Afraid that he will fall into poverty, he acts quickly. Before the owner can get the word out, the manager cancels his clients’ debts in the hope that they may one day help him.

It seems strange but the owner regards this behavior as clever. Jesus agrees. He says, “for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (Lk. 16). Jesus goes on, “I tell you make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.”

Augustine, the fourth century African saint writes, “I can’t believe this story came from the lips of our Lord.” We agree and immediately set to work explaining it, justifying it, domesticating Jesus so that he won’t interrupt our life. But Jesus will not sit down and be silent.

Perhaps we feel offended, because Jesus says, “be like that” manager when we believe we are better than that. If we were laid off, we would not walk out with the office furniture, or give away company property to win friends cheaply. We long for a simple explanation of this story that will not complicate our life. Jesus however does not care about this. He passionately desires that we will return to God.

Scholars want the same kind of simple answer that we do. They explain the story away. Some call it hyperbole, a kind of exaggeration that Jesus uses to get our attention. Others suggest that the owner is a first century crime boss and that this manager robs the rich to give to the poor. One scholar writes that the steward gives away his regular commission.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Each of these explanations might make us feel more comfortable, but I believe that Jesus is challenging us. Three things particularly stand out about his words this morning. Jesus speaks about how to treat money and the future.

1. Jesus talks about money more than you and I do. I read somewhere that in the gospel of Luke one out of every seven of Jesus’ sayings has to do with money. Jesus seems consistently more concerned about it than about friendship, sex, marriage, politics, government, war, family values, truthfulness or church. Jesus more wisely than most of us recognizes the power of money. I wonder if people who believe only in material things, but do not believe in God, talk more about money that spiritual people.

Jesus would say that both are wrong, both materialists and Christians underestimate the effect that money has on our soul. Materialists fail to recognize the existence of the ultimate. Christians fail to see how money is related to it. Jesus says some radical things about money. He understands the temptation to live for accumulating money and the things that it can buy.

With regard to the gospel and money, there is one thing I am sure of and one that I am not. I’m not certain about this part, but it seems to me that money in the Gospel of Luke is always tainted. Luke calls it mammon. This word includes everything that you own that has cash value. There is something already corrupt about mammon. We all tell stories to justify why we have money and someone else does not. We all may be equal in God’s eyes, but money substantiates the difference between a person with power and a person without it.

Part of me wants to resist this, to believe that money is simply neutral, that its goodness depends only on what we spend it on. But I think Luke’s point is that this view assumes that money has no history before we possess it. In our culture we have so many self-serving stories that justify our wealth. We often associate it with moral virtue (as if it mostly came from our hard work, intelligence, education, competence, etc.). By warning us about money, Luke reminds us of the truth. All we have and all we own and all we are comes from God.

This is not at all to say that we should try to be poor. Money can solve problems. The vast majority of problems could be resolved by a particular amount of money. Unfortunately the solutions that money buys never last. Our problems traced back to their roots are ultimately spiritual problems.

2. This brings me to the second point about money, the thing that I am more sure about. I believe that money connects the spiritual and the material. I know it is radical, but with Jesus, I am convinced that we can use our money to genuinely please God. Whether money is inevitably tainted as I believe Luke claims, or if it is neutral as my economics professors believed, money makes ministry possible. We can do God’s work with money. We can make an amazing difference in the lives of the poor, the sick, the lonely and the spiritually destitute through our use of money.[[2]](#endnote-2)

True wealth comes not from what we receive or own but from what we give away. Grace Cathedral with its beauty, its history as one of the oldest churches in Western America may seem as close to permanent as you can get in this world of change.

But this is a fragile institution. Every year a large number of people have to give a large amount of money in order for us to keep going. There are not many places that will make better use of your gift. Organized together we visit the sick, the lonely and the elderly. We teach children about God and introduce them to adults who they can depend on. God changes lives here. Maybe your money is honest, maybe it’s not, but it does do God’s work at Grace Cathedral.

3. The final thing that I believe Jesus says to us through this story has to do with time. I think faith can make some people passive. They reason that since God has all the power, what they do doesn’t matter. Jesus emphasizes that this is a parable about a turning point. The manager feels the same kind of pressure that we feel here today. But instead of responding with nostalgia for a more stable past, or by wallowing in his present misery, the manager acts decisively. Jesus applauds this.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The American poet Marie Howe wrote a poem about her brother dying of AIDS called “The Last Time.”[[4]](#endnote-4) “The last time we had dinner together in a restaurant / … he leaned forward // and took my two hands in his hands and said, / I’m going to die soon. I want you to know that. // And I said, I think I do know. / And he said, What surprises me is that you don’t. // And I said, I do. And he said, What? / And I said, Know that you’re going to die. // And he said, No, I mean that you are.”

When it comes to money, most of us act as if we don’t know that we will die. Jesus’ story is not just about how we are spending our money, but how we are spending our lives. Perhaps his deeper point is that this world, in which we spend ourselves to impress others or to protect our ego, is passing away. In this life we have a singular opportunity to spend ourselves shrewdly for the sake of God’s Kingdom.

The story of the unjust manager may not make complete sense to us yet. But this parable reminds us that a feeling of entitlement and superiority comes along with our money. This can isolate us from God, and make us blind to the needs of others. Jesus’ story also shows us the connection between the spiritual and the material, that God is more pleased by what we give than what we get.

Finally it awakens us to the truth that Jesus’ promise is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. You cannot buy the future. It will never belong to you. But you can act confidently because the future belongs to God. I think this is what my father did when he helped his co-worker. I wonder what effect his simple sacrifice has had in her life over the years. This is what Jesus himself did. Even on the way to the cross he trusted God completely. No home on earth will ever feel completely comfortable or safe because we were made to always draw nearer to our creator.

Images:
Stephen Young

Money

Grace Cathedral

Marie Howe

1. Another says that the manager expected the owner to check the books and that the owner is glad for the positive public relations that this debt relief would bring. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The escaped slave Frederick Douglass writes that, “You may not get all that you pay for in this world but you pay for all that you get.” Quoted in Frederick Streets, “Accountability,” *The Christian Century*, 3/17/99. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. If you go to a therapist, they’ll help you find your strengths and adjust for your weaknesses. They’ll give you books to read and have conversations about how you feel. If you go to Jesus, he tells you something totally different. Jesus says trust in God, because the future belongs to him. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Marie Howe *What the Living Do* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)