

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 23, 2007

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Scriptures: Amos 4:4-7, Psalm 113, 1 Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13

Today's text is one of those that make you say, "Wait just a minute. Did Jesus just say what I thought he just said? Did he just commend the manager who was dishonest?" Yeah, it kind of looks like it, doesn't it. Actually, this is one of those texts that keep biblical scholars employed. There are actually a variety of interpretations about what is going on here.

Some say Jesus was being facetious, others say the manager was actually just subtracting his own commission so he wasn't being dishonest after all. But mostly, they say, that Jesus was not commending his dishonesty, Jesus was commending his astuteness, his resourcefulness is using money to accomplish his goals. It makes me wonder what just happened among the disciples that Jesus needed to say to them, "Use your heads guys."

There is actually one translation from a paraphrase Bible called The Message Remix that gives a better sense of that. It reads, "To the next he said, 'And you, what do you owe? He answered, A hundred sacks of wheat. He said, Take your bill, write in eighty.' Now here's the surprise. The master praised the crooked manager. And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way – but for what is right"

I think it helps to remember this is one of the few parables that Jesus tells just to the disciples. Most parables were for the crowd, or for a specific audience. This one was for the disciples, and I think Jesus was acknowledging a basic truth. We all have to deal with money. We have to have it to live, to pay rent or mortgage, to buy food, to provide for our families. Jesus knew that. He and the disciples moved around as a group. They needed places to stay and food to eat. They had a designated treasurer. And there were people, usually women, who "provided for them out of their resources."

Money, property, and such resources are not inherently bad. They just are. In fact, a person should be smart about how you use it. I think Jesus is suggesting to the disciples that they should be astute, even resourceful in how they use the funds they have.

It is easy to fall into a trap of only thinking about the narrow view, about how am I doing at following God's commands. Am I staying on the straight and narrow? I daresay, in this parable, Jesus is saying there is more to it than that. Followers ought to be bold, maybe even creative, for the sake of God's kingdom, for the sake of God's goals. Disciples are called to use wealth creatively – for good.

You see, the Christian life is so much more than not doing bad things. Christian life is about doing good in the world. Christian life is about using the gifts and talents God gave us to serve God, to serve God's purposes. The saying about being faithful with a little, reminded me of the parable of the talents. Which basically asks, what are you doing with what God has given you?

It boils down, in the end, to a choice. You can either use what God has given you to serve yourself, or God. You can either use your money, your time, your abilities, your energy to get more money, more wealth, more stuff for yourself and your family. Or, you can use what God has given you to serve God, to care for God's children, God's creation. But you can't do both. There is a West African proverb that says, "The man who tries to walk two roads will split his pants." It doesn't work to go around with split pants.

Luke uses the metaphor of the slave with two masters, which at first seems like it is a little strong, that money, wealth, or the old term, Mammon, is a master to whom one can become enslaved. But that does actually happen. Sometimes wealthy people are the most driven. They are driven to get more and more wealth. They never have enough, so they are slaves to their own insatiable desire for more wealth. They are living to make money instead of making money to live.

I know this is not Stewardship Sunday, but I do believe this is the place where a word about tithing comes in. Some think of tithing as a burden, a rule, requirement to give your hard-earned money away, and if you don't you should feel guilty about not doing it. When actually, I think tithing is a gift. It is actually one of the ways God sets us free.

Tithing is the way God says to us, "Give me back a tenth of what I give you, and that's enough. Feel good about that and use the rest for your living." There is an old guideline that I often share with the couples I counsel who are about to get married, "Give 10 percent, save 10 percent, and spend the rest with joy and thanksgiving." Can you see how that attitude is actually freeing?

The thing I love about tithing is that it has absolutely nothing to do with how much money a person does or doesn't make. Tithing has everything to do with making the decision to serve God instead of wealth. In fact, statistics show that the more wealth a person has, the less likely it is that they tithe.

There is a story about a man, I guess he was a businessman; I'll call him Joe, who went to his pastor and told him that now that he was wealthy, it was just too hard to tithe. Back when he was starting out and only making \$20,000 a year, a tithe was only \$2000. And he could give away \$2000, no problem. But now that he made \$500,000 a year, a tithe was \$50,000; and there was no way he could give away that much money.

And his pastor immediately asked if they could pray about it. The pastor prayed, "Oh dear Lord, I am here asking you to help Joe. I am asking you to reduce his income until it's low enough that he will be able to tithe again." That probably wasn't what Joe was hoping for. But it was a way of asking that he be freed from his slavery to wealth. I'm sure he got the point.

Now, I don't know where any of this touches your lives today – but I am pretty sure it does somehow because money is such a touchy subject. Money, wealth, is a fact of life. We all need it to live. God just asks us to keep that in perspective. God asks us to give back a portion, and to use that portion as wisely, thoughtfully, and creatively as possible to do God's work in the world. Considering all that God has done, and continues to do, for us – that's not too much to ask. Amen.