

Ninth Sunday after Trinity: Luke 16:1–15

William Cwirla

Preached for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost · 2019

Let's talk about Money. I know you don't want to. Church is supposed to be for "spiritual stuff." But in today's Gospel, Jesus demands we talk about Money, and Money is very spiritual. It's one of the most important things in our lives. It keeps us awake at night and busy during the day. The ever-quotable poet Oscar Wilde once said: "When I was young, I thought money was the most important thing in life; now that I'm old, I know that it is."

Money is the head of our pantheon of idols. Long after we've evolved beyond silly superstition, blood sacrifice, and praying to blocks of wood and stone, we invented Money, the great preserver of wealth, promising love, health, and happiness to its worshippers. Money a means of storing labor without building bigger barns and silos. It doesn't spoil, it doesn't rot or rust (though it might devalue with inflation), and in this electronic age, it takes up no room at all. You can amass billions of dollars in Money, if you're lucky.

We learn at an early age that Money means power – the power to acquire possessions, the power to make friends and influence people, the power to have it your way. From our first allowance, we learn the creeds of the Money religion: "Be careful how you spend it." "Don't spend it all in one place." "A penny saved is a penny earned." We learn to treat money with reverence, awe, and sacramental mystery. If I were to set a twenty dollar bill on fire in front of you, you would gasp with horror and remind me that it's illegal to do that.

Luther understood the idolatry of Money when he wrote in the larger catechism:

Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trust and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god- Mammon by name, that is, money and possessions – on which he fixes his whole heart. It is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and property feels secure, happy, fearless, as if he were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, he who has nothing doubts and despairs as if he never heard of God. Very few there are who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have Mammon. This

desire for wealth clings and cleaves to our nature all the way to the grave.” (Large Catechism, 1.5-9)

Old Adam holds on to Money with a strong death grip. It takes death itself to pry it from our cold, dead hands.

In the Scriptures, the wealthy don’t seem to fare very well in the long run. “Blessed are you poor,” Jesus said, “for yours in the kingdom of God,” and in Luke He doesn’t mean “poor in spirit” but economically poor as in penniless. In the same chapter in Luke, a heartless rich man who is tormented in Hades while a poor beggar named Lazarus is comforted at the bosom of Abraham. A couple of chapters later, a rich young ruler stumbles over his own possessions as he wonders, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and Jesus tells him to sell everything and follow. Riches can be an obstacle to following Jesus. They are the weeds that choke out the Word before it has a chance to be fruitful. Jesus Himself was tempted by worldly wealth in exchange for worshipping at the feet of the devil. “All these things I will give to you.”

This isn’t to say that Money is the source of all evil. It isn’t. The love of Money is the root of all evil. The fear of not having it. The trust in gold above God is the root of Money’s idolatry. But there is nothing wrong with Money per se. Father Abraham was wealthy. King David had wealth, Solomon had wealth beyond measure. Wealthy people were part of the early church. Congregations met in their living rooms as house churches. People gave land and houses so that the early Christians could live a common life together.

You can’t serve two master, however. You must be servant of one and master of the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Money is a great servant, but a horrible Master; and you can be sure God won’t be your servant.

Jesus told a parable of a money manager who was fired for wasting his master’s money. He’s called to account and fired. In our day, he would have been shown the door and escorted to the parking lot. But in Jesus’ day, there was a little bit of a lag between the time he was fired and the time the word got out to the community. News traveled more slowly back then. So the manager took advantage of the situation, calls in his master’s debtors, and discounts their debt right on the spot. In all likelihood, he was giving up his own fees, commissions, bribes, and whatever else he was skimming, but at this point it didn’t matter. He was out of a job, out of shape, out of luck, and soon to be homeless and on the streets. And so one by one he calls in his master’s debtors and settles accounts with dazzling speed. The debtors are giddy over the

discounts. He's making new friends left and right. And the master is collecting on some deadbeat loans. Win, win, and win.

The master praises his crooked manager for being shrewd. And the people who heard Jesus' parable likely had a smile and a chuckle too, in a culture that values shrewdness as a virtue. Who doesn't like a story about a little guy sticking it to the Man on his way out the door? It's incredibly shrewd. The master can't say no, or he'll lose face in the community. The manager looks like a hero in the eyes of the people. He's secured something of a future. And, at the end of the day, business got done. Probably more business than that manager ever did for his master.

So what's the point? This: We are most faithful when we have nothing to lose, when we are literally dead to ourselves. The Samaritan who helped the man in the ditch had nothing to lose. This man, soon to be on the unemployment rolls, had nothing to lose. When we have nothing to lose, we take risks, we do things with a kind of reckless abandon and freedom. There is no fear of failure when you're already a loser. When we live in fear, we don't take risks, we don't do business. We wrap our talent on loan in a handkerchief and bury it so it won't get tarnished. We take the Gospel of Jesus and wrap it up in dogmas and books and keep Him pure on a shelf far removed from the world.

You can't serve two Masters. You can't have your mouth at two altars. You can't have two gods. Divided loyalty is no loyalty at all. Old Adam will choose Money over God every day of the week including Sundays and holy days. "This desire for wealth clings and cleaves to our nature all the way to the grave." It needs to drown and die, together with all the other lusts, desires, and mistaken notions of old Adam. We need to have a change of thinking, a new perspective on wealth. We need to see our Money in a new way, not as something earned but as gift given, not as something that controls us but as something we control. And we need to see ourselves as masters of Money not servants.

You are servants of Christ, slaves to Him in righteousness. He rescued you. He bought you. He redeemed you not with Money – gold and silver- but with Blood, His holy precious Blood offered for you. He bought you out of slavery to Sin and Death and made you a servant of God, a priest offering your bodies, your time, your talents, your treasures as living sacrifices of praise.

You are servants of God, and you are masters of your Money. Money is your slave. It obeys your command. “Go help that poor person over there. Go help that homeless man. Go spread the Gospel over the world. Go provide a place for prayer and worship.” You can’t serve God and Money, but you certainly can serve God with your Money. To give is to extend yourself, to give away your time, your talent, your labor, your life. Money allows you to extend yourself in more ways than just one at the same time. You can’t be everywhere, but you can send servant Money wherever you want.

Mastery of money is exercised two ways: offering and charity. In offering, we give back to God, the Source of all wealth. In charity, we extend the blessing of God to others. In both, we learn to hold our Money loosely, with a dead, open hand of faith. It’s a hand that gives freely, without counting the cost or running the profit/loss spreadsheet. A hand that gives cheerfully, generously, and joyfully without regard for gain or reward but simply for the joy of giving.

Christ is your life. He is at the core of your being as a new creation in Christ, as a child of God. He did not count the riches of heaven as something to be grasped but became poor for your sake, a servant, a slave to His own law, obedient to death. He came in poverty, with no place to lay His head, no place to call His home. He knows your heart; He knows your temptations. He knows the lure of Money. He desires your freedom. That doesn’t mean you can’t have nice things, but nice things are nothing without the one thing needful.

“Money can’t buy you love,” sang the Beatles. It can’t buy peace or joy either. It can’t still a troubled conscience, it can’t wash away guilt and shame, it can’t forgive sins. It can’t pay the debt of the Law. Money can’t comfort you in your dying or raise you from the dead. Money can’t bring you eternal life. Money can only drive you to your grave, and you certainly can’t take it with you..

“I forgive you all of your sins.” What’s the monetary value of that? “My Body given for you. My blood shed for you.” What amount of Money can buy that? Sin swapped for Righteousness. Death for Life. Resurrection to abundant life. No less than the kingdom of God is yours in your poverty. Such a deal! The world would snap it up if it could see it; but it must be believed.

The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own than are the sons of light. The world knows a good deal when it sees one. The Pharisees, who should have spotted the outrageousness of grace missed it for all their bookkeeping and love of money. God’s amazing

grace appears too good to be true. Outrageous, scandalous to the religious, almost dishonest by our way of thinking. Sinners should get what they deserve; good people should get what they deserve. We should get... Oh, never mind that.

Instead, we pray, “Father, forgive us our debts.” Wipe the books clean. And to the eyes of the world, faith looks like a dishonest money manager who saves own skin by cashing in on the name and reputation of his master. To the sons of light, this is freedom. You are free. As free as an unemployed money manager with nothing to lose. Free to be reckless in love, in charity , in offering. Free to hear the call of Jesus, “Follow Me.”

Follow Him, you servants of Christ. Be slaves to God; be masters of Money.

wmc

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Luke 16:1-15 (15 Pentecost 2019, Proper 20C)”, posted 2019-09-22 (<https://htlcms.org/2019/09/luke-161-15-22-september-2019-proper-20c/>).