

Ninth Sunday after Trinity: Luke 16:1–15

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Today's reading from the Gospel according to St. Luke deals with the topic of Money. Property and Possessions. The stuff that keeps many of us awake at night and busy during the day. "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." It's doubtful that Jesus said all these things back to back. Some of them appear elsewhere in a different context. It's more likely that Luke, under the watchful editorial eye of the Holy Spirit chose to gather up a bunch of "money sayings" all into one place so that we could hear them all at once. What Jesus has to say can be neatly summarized in a sentence that doesn't appear here in Luke: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

This is about faith, where you heart is. Is it with God or with something else? What is it that you fear, love, and trust above all things? Luther said it well in the Large Catechism:

"Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts 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)

"All the way to the grave" reminds us that this is the way of the old Adam, our sinful flesh which also clings and cleaves to our nature until we die. Our hearts are restless. They will fear, love, and trust most anything that promises health, happiness, love, safety, meaning, security. We learn at an early age that money means power, the power to acquire things, the power to hire, influence, even bribe others to do what we want. From our first allowance to our first paycheck we learn that money is the means by which we can acquire what we want. Money is portable wealth. It makes storing wealth possible. You don't have to worry about building

bigger barns and silos, just convert your goods and services into money and you can acquire as much as you're able. And if you can't afford something now, well, you can borrow and pay it back later. Money is power in this world. The powerful have money and the moneyed are powerful. The poet Oscar Wilde once said, "When I was young I thought that money was the most important thing in life; now that I am old I know that it is."

Humorist Mark Twain quipped, "The lack of money is the root of all evil."

Filmmaker Woody Allen noted, "Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reason."

Jesus said "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

In the Scriptures, the rich don't seem to fare very well from the eternal perspective. The rich man winds up tormented in Hades while the poor man Lazarus is comforted in the bosom of Abraham. The rich young ruler stumbles over the question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" because he had many possession and was reluctant to give them up. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, scoffed at what Jesus had to say and ridiculed Him. God knows the heart. He knows your deepest fears, loves, and trusts. What man exalts, God despises. What man considers glorious, God considers hideous. What man calls glory, God calls shame.

It isn't riches but faith in riches that God judges. Abraham was rich, yet he was faithful. David was rich, yet he was a man after God's own heart. Wealthy people, both men and women, were numbered among the early disciples. It's not riches that are condemned but faith in riches. Money is not the root of all evil. The love of money is the root of all evil. "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

Jesus told a parable of a crooked money manager who was wasting his master's possessions. Charges were brought. The man was called in to give an account and fired on the spot, which left him in a bit of a jam. He was unemployed. So what does he do? Before word gets out about his being fired, he quickly calls in the man's debtors and starts discounting loans on the fly. He knocks off fifty percent here, twenty percent there, collecting what he can at deep discount. In other words, he's cashing in on his master's good name and reputation. It's a shrewd move. The master is cornered. If he refuses the deal, he looks bad. If he takes the deal, the crooked money manager looks good and has a lot of friends. The master knew shrewdness when he saw it, and he praised the dishonest manager for it.

Seems odd, doesn't it? Making a crook the hero of a parable? Or perhaps not. Think about it. When was the manager most effective at what he was doing? Precisely when he was for all intents and purposes dead. He'd been fired. He had nothing to lose with this "Hail Mary" pass to the end zone. He's like the Samaritan in the parable of the man who fell among the thieves, who doesn't have a care in the world and no law constraining him and so is free to be neighbor and priest to the broken, bleeding man in the ditch. That day may easily have been the most productive day that money manager ever had. If he'd worked that hard earlier, he might never have been fired. But it's only when he is fired, when he doesn't have a single thing to justify himself, that he's free to make friends with someone else's money. He lived as one who was dead, as someone who had nothing to lose.

That's when we are truly free, when we have nothing to lose. That's what faithfulness is about. It's holding wealth with a dead open hand of faith. The test of that is how easily we can let go. "Take they our life, goods, fame, child, wife – let these all be gone. Our victory has been won. The kingdom ours remaineth." And if the "kingdom ours remaineth" we have nothing to lose, do we?

You see how tightly the old Adam clings to us. The mere talk of giving it all away causes us to tense up and reach protectively for our wallets. Luther called the wallet the most sensitive organ of the human body. God literally has to pry our wealth out of the old Adam's fingers – whether by taxes, economic downturns, theft, fraud, coercion, bribes, finally by literally killing us. "You can't take it with you." Even the act of offering and almsgiving, of giving to the Lord as an act of worship and of giving to the poor is an exercise in killing the old Adam with his death grip on money.

You can't serve two masters. Divided loyalty is no loyalty at all. The old Adam in us will choose Mammon over the Lord 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 has to die along with all the other lusts and evil desires of the old Adam. It has to be drowned and die. If we were left to our own devices and shrewdness, none of us, not one, would be saved. We'd all be like the rich young ruler who turned his back on Jesus when he heard he needed to downsize, sell all his stuff and come die and rise with Jesus. The way of salvation is exceedingly narrow. It doesn't allow room for your stuff. It's not like the airlines where you can drag a pile of luggage through that narrow door of death and resurrection.

Our attitude toward money reminds us that we are at our heart of hearts idolators who cannot save ourselves. But you were washed. You were justified, sanctified, glorified in Christ. You are baptized. The old is drowned, the new has risen. The new you in Christ is slave to no one but Christ. The new you in Christ is free, you have nothing to lose. The kingdom of God is yours. The treasures you have now are a gift from God to you, placed into the dead and empty hand of faith. The new you in Christ is not a slave to Money but a master of it. You can order it around. You can tell Masters Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin, “go feed the hungry person over there” or “go help that homeless person.” The new you in Christ gives freely, joyfully, cheerfully, not out of coercion or for gain, but out of freedom in love.

To be “faithful in unrighteous Mammon” is to handle your money and possessions full of faith, trusting in our good and gracious God who has given all He has in His Son Jesus in order to save us from our bondage to sin, to death, to the Law and to anything that would enslave us.

To be faithful in unrighteous Mammon means that we are free to use our money and possessions to serve others, to do the goodness and mercy of God for our neighbors, to share our goods with a generous hand and pour our wine with a generous wrist trusting that “the kingdom ours remaineth.”

To be faithful in righteous Mammon begins with the offering plate where we do not simply support our congregation’s budget but we give thanks to our giver God not only with words but with wealth, loosening that death grip our old Adam has on our money, dropping dead to the things of this world, living in freedom rather than slavery.

You are baptized to be servants of God, disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, priests in Christ’s royal priesthood of the baptized. You cannot serve two masters. Your master is Christ who saved you by His dying and rising. Your master is Christ who saves you through your Baptism, through the word of forgiveness and reconciliation He speaks to you, through the Bodied bread and Bloodied wine with which He feeds you. Money can’t do that. Money can’t bring love, joy, or peace. Money can’t wash away your sins or give you a free and clear conscience before God. Money can’t make those twinges of guilt go away or reconcile your past. Money can’t raise you from the grave and heal your death. Money is a terrible taskmaster that will drive you to your grave even as you cling to it.

Christ is your Master. He says, “Come to me, and I will give you rest.” He says, “Be anxious about nothing, but look at the birds and the lilies and how God takes care of them and how

much more God cares for you, bought by the Blood of His Son.”

You cannot serve God and money. Money is a means to an end. God is the end and Christ is your master. That’s freedom, my friends. Freedom to enjoy, to take risks, to give generously, to live. You’re dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. The nice thing about being dead is that you have nothing to lose. The kingdom ours remaineth.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Luke 16:1-15 / 22 September 2013”, posted 2013-09-22 (<https://htlcms.org/2013/09/money-matters/>).