

Sermon for September 22, 2013

Eighteenth Sunday of Pentecost, Luke 16:1-13

BLESSINGS TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD THE FATHER, OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Well, we made it! Our **125th** anniversary celebration was last Sunday. It was a **great** time. Once again, I would like to **thank** everyone who helped in any way to make it the **successful** day it was.

Now this week we move back into the **reality** of day to day life as reflected in two of the three readings we had for this morning. It is about **money** and how we can use it for good or for ill. After all this is September and this is the time we usually talk about money in the church. But today, I am going to be talking **about** money, not **asking** for it. **WHEW!!!!**

Side light: here is a fact that you may or may not have known: did you know that Jesus spoke about money more than anything except the subject of the Kingdom of God? That is how much **emphasis** was put on money back then. Not much that **different** from today was it?

In our **first** reading from the Book of Amos we heard some pretty **harsh** words spoken **against** those who **trample** on the needy, bring **ruin** to the poor of the land, and want to **cheat** for their own gain. We heard it said, "*surely I will*

never forget any of their deeds". These are pretty **convicting** words for those people who were **not** doing right by their neighbor.

Throughout the **whole** Old Testament there are many teachings about how money should be handled. About how every 50 years, called the **Year of the Jubilee**, land had to be returned to the **original** family members so farming families had a place to keep the family together. **Debts** would be forgiven. **Contracts** were immoral if the parties did not agree to it as free and responsible persons, and **interest or usury**-which in those days was seen as **stealing**-could **not** be charged. At that time, the issue of money was about **relationships** between people. Contracts were made by a **handshake** not by lawyers and words written on a piece of paper.

Then in our **gospel** reading we heard Jesus telling his disciples a parable about money issues as well. The disciples would have **most certainly** known all these Old Testament laws before Jesus told them this story. They would **also have known** the strict social rules of the time in which hospitality was by no means optional—which, as it works out, is also a portion of this story.

In our story we have two **main** characters: the *rich man* and the *dishonest manager* who was being charged with **squandering** the rich man's property and subsequently being fired. The **first thing** we need to do is to put ourselves into the **culture** of that time period to help us understand just how this rather strange story

that Jesus is telling works because when we read this it sounds like Jesus does **not** have a problem with the dishonest manager; although, as it works out, it **does seem** as though the master in the story had himself been acting in a somewhat **underhanded** manner.

As I said before, Jews were **forbidden** to lend money at interest, but many people got around this by 'lending in kind' which was a very **risky** type of debt to incur with no interest or payments due until maturity. Oil and wheat—which are the commodities the manager negotiated with the master's debtors—could **easily** be manipulated in this way. It is likely that what the manager **deducted** from the debtor's bill was the **interest** that the master had been charging the debtors with a **higher** rate being on the **oil** than on the **wheat**. When the manager **reduced** the bill to the amount that that had been lent originally—the debtors would be **delighted** and the master could not bring charges against the manager without being honest about his less than ethical business practices. The only **thing** he could do was to admire the manager's **clever and shrewd** approach.

The manager **was only** looking out for himself as well because he knew he had **no skills** and if he had **no job** he saw this debt reduction tactic as his **only** option so he could stay in people's **good graces** so they would **welcome** him into their homes when he was in a time of need. Sounds like a lot of corruption and manipulation going on there on **many** levels.

You may be asking **why** Jesus was telling this rather strange parable to his disciples anyway? Well, if our reading would have gone on for **two more verses** we would have learned the answer. It says, “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him.” So he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.” **There** is the reason for the parable. The Pharisees **overheard** what Jesus was telling his disciples. They **loved** money, they loved the **power** money gave them, and this parable was hitting a little too close to home for them because they loved the wrong thing and Jesus knew it!!!!

How about us—can we sometimes love the wrong thing? Folks, we cannot run away from God—“God knows our hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God. Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 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. You cannot serve God and wealth.” **BOOM** there it is!!!! These are not easy words to hear or live by that is for sure!!!!

In our world of **consumerism**, in our world of one trying to **outdo** the other, in our world of **bigger is better**, where does **God** fit in? Money in **any** amount

can be a **distraction** in life. The **real meaning** of life is to be found in our **relationship with God**. Because it is **not** the money itself that is the problem. It is the **constant focus** on money and the being **overly fond** of money that can be our downfall and undoing.

What we have here in the gospel lesson for today—as in many of Jesus’ parables—is a reversal of roles. What is **highly valued** among people is possessions, land, honor, and money. But the **reverse** of that is the question—**what is highly valued in the kingdom of God?** A relationship with **God** and relationship with **people** that includes gracious and generous acts toward them, **faith** in your fellow man/woman, **love** for people no matter who they are, and **forgiving** others when they offend us in some way. **These** are the things that Jesus says have real value.

Money is **not** meant to give us power and superiority over people. It is to be used to **help** someone in a time of need. Using our **God given** time, talents, and monetary blessings for the **good** of others and for the **good** of our church is called being a good steward of what God has given us. Understanding the **biblical** concept of stewardship is a **big clue** in solving the **mystery** of this puzzling parable before us today as it points to areas of tension and struggle we have in our own lives.

Jesus wants us to think about our value systems and what we deem important because one day **each of us** will have to face God. One day we will **stand before the throne** of God in utter poverty. In that place where money is *neither received nor spent*, where all the **values** we know in this world will be *turned upside down*, and where the **importance** of our relationship with God will become crystal clear. **That** is where we will have to face the facts and own up to our behavior.

In this gospel reading Jesus gives us an **invitation** to come into His wide-open arms and place our faith in **him** and **not** the things of this world. An invitation to connect faith and life-or not, an invitation to make faith active in love-or not, and an invitation to set an example of selfless service to all God's people-or not. It is **up to us** if we want to **accept** the invitation-or not. This invitation begins and ends with **self examination** and seeking to **follow Jesus' example** as we move ever forward hearing the words, "surely I will never forget any of their deeds" ringing in our ears. **AMEN.**

