

First things first

Luke 16:1-13

September 18, 2016

They say that there are three subjects you should never talk about in polite company: religion, politics, and money. So, having noted that, today we are going to talk about all three!

We are going to talk about religion because that's what we do here. We talk about our faith, not in a theoretical way, but in a practical way. We talk about how our love for Jesus and, even more importantly, how Jesus' love for us affect the way we think and act and make life choices.

We are going to talk about politics because that's our sermon series theme this fall: "The politics of Jesus." We are inundated, especially now, with political speech, but so much of it, if not close to all of it, is empty of any real meaning. It is calculated, ingratiating, cynical, hyperbolic, intended for effect, not to tell the truth. Almost all of it is gamesmanship. Almost all of it is crap. So we need to hear a different voice, a voice that speaks the truth, in love, a voice that speaks to the real needs and real hurts and real injustices of this age. We need to hear Jesus' voice.

And we are going to talk about money because Jesus talks about money. Jesus talks about money a lot.

What is money? Money is, first of all, an object, a piece of inked paper or a piece of stamped metal. But that piece of paper or that hunk of metal is by itself almost worthless. The value of money is abstract. Money is an abstraction. The coin or bill represents something else. It stands in for the value of labor -- your labor mowing my lawn is worth \$20 to me. Or it stands in for the value of another object different from itself -- you and I agree that your car may be traded to me in return for \$12000 given from me to you. The abstraction of money facilitates an easier exchange of commodities and services.

But in an advanced economy, money becomes even more abstract, representing not merely the value of any actual object or service, but instead the value of its own potential which means that money becomes valuable in and of itself. Money becomes valuable because of its potential, because of the power it represents, power to acquire or power to influence or power to control.

Money then is the abstraction of power itself and money is sought as an end in itself, not exchanged for goods or services, but accumulated and multiplied and made made to reproduce itself. Money is power and as a representation or even the representation of power, money dictates what matters and what doesn't matter, and who matters and who doesn't matter.

So money becomes more, so much more, than a simple means of exchange. Money represents all that we want and all that we dream of. We look to money, to its power, to bring us pleasure, security, status, self-affirmation, and even happiness. Money becomes the measure of all I want, and, consequently, money becomes the measure of all I am. Money becomes the measure of me.

But then a strange thing happens. When money measures me, when it becomes the abstraction of my value as a human being, then money is no longer my servant but my master. It is no longer a means by which I exercise control over my life. Instead it controls me.

And this may be just as true if I have much or if I have little. Poor people may be slaves to money. Rich people may be slaves to money. And all of us who are somewhere in between rich and poor may be slaves to money. The telltale sign that money has become my master is the point when money becomes an end in itself, when money becomes the measure of my worth, when it is money on which I depend to give me what I want to have and make me what I want to be.

This is what Jesus is determined to make clear to his disciples and to us: you cannot serve both God and money. He doesn't say you shouldn't serve both God and money. He says you can't.

If you are counting on money for security, if you are depending on money to bring you happiness and peace of mind, if you are making money the arbiter of your worth as a human being, you are serving money, and God is left entirely out of the picture. God is left entirely out of your life.

But if you are counting on God for security, if you are depending on God to bring you happiness and peace of mind, if you are making God the arbiter of your worth as a human being, you are serving God. Money is there still, money is still useful, but money doesn't really matter.

Jesus makes his point by telling a story and it's a funny, unexpected story, a story about a bad steward, bad because he is incompetent or bad because he is dishonest or both! This steward serves as the account/property manager for a wealthy man, but when word of his misdeeds reaches his employer, he is told to close all the accounts and hand over the proceeds because he is going to be fired. So this bad, yet proud man -- too proud to beg, but not proud enough to earn his own living by hard labor -- this bad, but clever man hatches a plan.

I know what I'll do ...

"How much do you owe my master?"
"A hundred jars of olive oil."
"Make it fifty."

"And you, how much do you owe?"
"A hundred measures of wheat."
"Make it eighty."

And Jesus told his followers to go and do likewise. Say what?

Use worldly wealth to win friends for yourselves, so that when money is a thing of the past you may be received into an eternal home.

Use money to make friends. Use money. The bad steward was smart enough to understand. He may be out of a job, he may have no income, he may have no money, but if he has friends. Money has only temporary value, temporary purpose. One day money will be a thing of the past, but friends matter, friends last.

The point is this: money isn't everything. In the long run, money doesn't matter. Money doesn't come first. So use it. Don't cling to it. Don't obsess over it. Just use it.

I have always been proud of the way our church handles its endowment fund because we use it! We don't cling to it, we don't fret over spending it, we use it to support our ministry and mission as a people of God. We know our security does not rest in money, but in God.

I had a transformational moment this summer. It happened in church, at St. Francis by the Sea Episcopal Church. Being in Maine, I had been thinking about the future, about the day, some day, when I will retire to Maine, and I had been fretting, fretting about having enough, trying to figure out what I have to do to make sure I will have enough money to retire.

That Sunday, the priest, a substitute priest, Steven Hayward, preached from Luke 12, the story of the rich man who built great big barns and filled them with all his stuff and said to himself: "Now I have what I need. Now I am all set!" And God said to him: "You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life." And I thought: "Oh. Oh, my."

But this is freedom! It doesn't depend on me and it doesn't depend on having enough. My life doesn't depend on money.

That's what Jesus wants for his people: freedom! Freedom from worry and freedom for joy. Freedom from preoccupation with money and stuff and freedom for communion with God and dear friends. Freedom to use money, instead of serving it, treating it not as my own but as on loan from God, given to me, given to us, to use, to make all of our lives, my life and yours and theirs, richer and fuller. Money is given to us to use, to use well, to use as God uses, to bless.

Almost twenty years ago, several of us from the church traveled to Sinsinawa for a Ministry of Money workshop. Ministry of Money was a ministry birthed from Church of the Savior in Washington DC that now goes by the name, "Faith and Money Network." The ministry contends that we need to talk about money as people of faith, because all too often "we're tied up in knots over money."

“Have you ever felt like this?,” they ask on their website:

- *Anxious that you don't have enough now and won't have enough for the future*
- *Trapped by money decisions shaped by cultural pressures rather than faith*
- *Bombarded by messages that you aren't enough without more stuff, yet enveloped in silence and perhaps even shame*
- *Addicted to work or anxiety, consumption or substances*
- *Blocking God's call on your life because you're too busy earning money, and buying, protecting, storing, maintaining, organizing, and getting rid of your stuff*
- *Alienated from God and God's community when you separate your financial life from your spiritual life*

Then, they urge: “Untie the knots! Transforming our relationship to money can free us to:”

- *Make money decisions out of faith rather than fear*
- *Live in a sense of abundance -- a deep sense that we have enough*
- *Talk about money honestly and constructively*
- *Build community, enriching what we can depend on beyond our personal financial portfolios*
- *Develop solidarity with God's wider community*
- *Live more fully as God's faithful, interconnected, generous people*

It was under the auspices of Ministry of Money that I went to Haiti in 1991 on a pilgrimage of reverse mission. It is called “reverse mission” because we go to see and to learn “how many people in the world, despite terrible financial need, live lives full of love and generosity and gratitude.” And that is indeed what I saw. I saw people poor in money and stuff, but rich in faith and joy.

Money isn't everything and sometimes, maybe all the time, it is really nothing at all. When we put money first, it gets in the way. It gets in the way of freedom. It gets in the way of faith. It gets in the way of joy. It gets in the way of God.

You cannot serve both God and money. Which will you choose?