

THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Lord, let your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

As you read your Bible you will run into the most spoken of topic in both Old and New Testaments, over and over. I find that most people guess that the topic would be "love." It is an excellent guess, but although mentioned in a very healthy 300 verses, that is the **second** most mentioned topic. Certainly, the ultimate act of God's love, Jesus' crucifixion for our sake and salvation, trumps any other topic. However, verse for verse, from beginning to end of the Bible, the most mentioned, and that being in approximately 2 thousand, 3 hundred and fifty verses. Is – drum roll please—money and possessions, and of course the relationship between money, possessions and our devotion to God. And, of course, the TENSION that exists between money and our devotion to God. We simply cannot escape the effect it has on our lives. Blessedly, such influence is spoken of quite often, I believe, in order to provide the strength and discipline to help us followers of God to make right, moral, ethical decisions, right choices.

You will remember that to the apostles, money and possessions are the presumed signal of God's blessing in many bible stories. At least until Jesus told the eye of the needle story. Certainly, in any case, God's blessing follows those who live an upright and righteous life. Moses said it. The Psalmists say it. Jesus talks of the abundant life. To be quite honest we'd have to say we usually think the same thing. There almost seems to be a "you do this and I will give you that" equation between having money and possessions and the assumed goodness of the person who has them. However, recalling the need for context for balanced biblical teaching, we have before us both Jesus' story, and Amos' powerful prophetic word this morning. In these we hear about the peril of allowing the assumptions of only equating blessing with money in our pocket.

Jesus' story is a story about making choices. About choosing a path. And then, without blinking an eye, about pursuing those choices and path with singular determination and, shall we say, zest? Given his Hebrew audience, perhaps not zest, but chutzpah!. But also choosing and walking with whole-hearted creativity, the path that has been chosen.

If this is your first time to address Jesus' teaching on this subject, this story today quite possibly inspires a collective, "Whoa. This parable stuff has reached new heights of obscurity today!" Admittedly, it takes a little unpacking, but it's well worth the effort.

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Now, as we have done for most of this summer's sermons, let us take a very intentional look at the immediate context, or you could say, take a look at the setting of today's Gospel story.

It's important that we make note that there is no indication that there has been a scene change in the movement of Jesus in the last few Sunday's Gospel stories. That means that we may assume he is still at the same Pharisee leader's dinner party where he has noted out loud the jostling to get to a higher seat, and then as they come to him, he is sitting with outcasts and sinners... and so you still have this group of Pharisees whose noses are out of joint. We'd like to think they've gained humility, since Jesus admonished them. I feel sorry for those Pharisees. By being attentive to the Law of Moses they are on an intensive search. The search is how best to live, a question they pursue with zeal and chutzpah, and tragically, legalism. So they don't like it, but this new teacher has some compelling, though sometimes odd to them, insights. In many places in the Gospel the phrase of astonishment is, "And he teaches with such authority."

We recall that throughout the party, Jesus has offered the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Drachma Coin and, although we didn't hear it read, he has added the parable of The Lost and Found Son (or the Prodigal Son). The three stories about God's love, not rejection, of sinners and outcasts, plus the setting of their telling in an intimate table fellowship, give the disciples and the other guests an experience of how good God's desire for them can be when they are together.

I can imagine that Jesus' audience has had a vast array of visceral responses to these stories. I use the word visceral because the parables go right to the heart of identity issues, and when Jesus teaches it is felt right in the hearts of his hearers. Perhaps you have a visceral story of how the Spirit of God has hit you hard.

The issues of identity that hit us hard are for example these:

how does God see me/us?

how do they shape how I/we see one another?

how do I convince myself of my righteousness or goodness by making others less than I am?

We are known by the company we keep and if Jesus' stories have had any impact, this group is about to begin keeping new company. They will be breaking down ancient barriers, re-arranging their vision of God, and opening themselves to new lives shaped by a new vision of who they are, formed by God and not popular opinion. There is no question that visceral experiences of Jesus lead to changed lives.

Now, Jesus is no dummy. He knows that one of the biggest divisions in any setting, in any time, between people is between those who have and those who have not. The next

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issue he examines for these newly minted disciples is the faithful use of a disciple's worldly possessions. Remember local context here: apparently "all sorts and conditions" of people are present in the room. Every single person around the table and around the room is addressed in the next story – no matter their socio-economic level or spiritual condition.

As if to drive home the point, Jesus next tells an outrageous story. Jesus in his parable is not endorsing what happens. But, as the strategy of many parables is to push the envelope of comprehension, to encourage his hearers to "think outside of the box", in doing so here he illustrates the zeal and determination he is seeking from his disciples to choose the Kingdom of God and live in it. Again, recall what I said about the Pharisees, that they are seeking the BEST way to live in righteousness. They are his hearers at this moment, as well, and so Jesus strategically chooses the topic of "choices for LIFE"

So, then, he tells the story of the Shrewd Steward. As the parable unfolds, a servant is about to be dismissed for wasting his employers money; he was neglecting his responsibilities. The servant's future looks very bleak. "Beggary" awaits him because he lacks the strength for manual labor. As he ponders the bind he is in, he receives a flash of insight and realizes how he can solve his dilemma. He then makes a decision that has a bearing on his entire future - the security of being welcomed into the homes of his master's former creditors, he reduces their indebtedness, as was within his authority. The employer praises the steward, not for his earlier neglect of his duty, but for having the creative foresight to use his authority for the sake of what would be needed later on when he had no job...

In any case, the moral of the story is that Jesus wants his hearers to see that the choice before them is of the same enormity as that of the shrewd steward. Their whole future hangs in the balance. Jesus wants them, like the Steward, to be shrewd, daring and willing to sacrifice for the future. This is an all or nothing proposition. The people, in fellowship around the table that evening, have already tasted something new in what life can be. Jesus is asking if this is going to be an evening of circus curiosity, love him and leave him kind of thing, or do they see the crucial importance of completely revitalizing, re-constructing, re-orienting the way they live to the Kingdom's standards and values?

Again, Jesus does not tell this parable in order to condone the character's highly questionable behavior. But it is very important to see that Jesus cracks up the old equation of justification. Wicked people can have lots of money, and still be wicked; good people can have very little, and still be judged as righteous and vice versa. As well, Jesus neither condemns or condones having money and possessions. It is the choice to serve God, seeking God's Kingdom and its righteousness, that will shape the believers' relationship to their money and possession. We may have a little, or we may

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have a lot, just as the people around Jesus' table that night long ago. Regardless of how much we have, we still have to decide how to use it.

The sayings of Jesus that follow the parable answer many of the questions that probably were buzzing in the heads of the people at the party. "If I am to give myself to God's Kingdom and I am family, kin, in equal status with everyone here, how do I use what I have? " "If I have lots, what do I give and receive; if I have little, what do I give and receive?"

So here is a valid understanding of this parable. Jesus says, "Make friends with money, but beware choosing to worship it!" In other words, get lots of it. Go for it so that you can use it, direct it for God's purposes. Ask, seek, knock to find out what God wants done with money and then do it! Make lots for God, spend lots for God. Andrew Carnegie understood this principle. He said that a man who dies with all his wealth dies ashamed. Jesus says, walk the Kingdom's ways now, so you will know how to get there later on; build riches that last unto eternal life. Money spent helping others teaches us to live as God does, giving and giving to build the other up, to widen the river of blessing to all around; whose living waters nourish creation. Being faithful to God in the riches of this world, even though it is nothing to the One who can make the Milky Way as well as a dollar, teaches us the way of uniting our lives and our wills with God. In right stewardship of money we learn God's ways in the here and now in order to take our place as contributors to the uplifting of creation, to be creative and blessed. In so living now, we taste the eternal banquet that is foundational to the Kingdom, and the joy that only fulfilling God's desire can bring!

All throughout these sayings, however, Jesus is very, very clear. Money is not and can never be the end in itself. If the end of our working is money alone, without its ultimate use in mind first, we will be shaped - or should I say stunted - by the values that money for money's sake engenders. Money, when it is a vehicle for God's love, will take us far along our spiritual journey through our interactions of working and giving to those whom God seeks to build up. For money to be a vehicle, we have to be faithful in our relationship to it: the money is not ours, it is God's. We're the stewards. If we keep the money, thinking it is ours with an occasional tip for God, we are, in fact and indeed, the roadblocks, the impediments, for the Kingdom's presence in the present. We have made the choice to be servants of an idol.

The whole Bible teaches that there's nothing easier from which to make an idol than money. We think that what it will do, bring, provide will give us our lives, our happiness, our identity.

And that, brothers and sisters, is Wrong-way thinking. The prophet Amos puts it pretty plainly, and Jesus says the same, that money pursued for itself becomes an idol, and, as if it were alive, it demands service and sacrifice that has nothing to do with God's

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Kingdom. The end of money that is sought for itself, leads to smallness, not greatness of spirit. The power of mammon serves itself and sees no wrong, or more aptly put, does not see the suffering of widows and orphans, sinners and outcasts, because they are not a part of the picture of making more mammon. Mammon is exclusive. It wants no other company. Mammon is destructive on its own because it demands that we treat others, sisters and brothers as Jesus has identified them, as objects easily sacrificed to the getting of more Mammon.

And neither Amos nor Jesus were fools. They knew that the servants of mammon frequented the Temple in Jerusalem. They sat in the places of honor, yet only going through the motions while singing Psalms, even as they asked, "When will the New Moon festival be over that we can get back to the real business of selling grain? (that is, making mammon)?"

The only way to "tame" mammon is to deprive it of its idol status and revert it to servant status. The only way to do this is to seek first the Kingdom of God, to commit your life and faith, your identity and your pocketbook with as much earnestness as the crafty steward. We have to choose who will we serve, we can't serve both. We can't have the Kingdom of God and the idol of mammon. Our identity and being is shaped by who or what we serve. In one temple, we are the servant who thinks of himself as the master. In the other temple, we are family welcomed home and full partakers of the fruits of our Father in Heaven.

You know that the more things change, the more they stay the same. I am reminded that even as Joshua was called to state his declaration three thousand years ago, so, too, are we called to state our allegiance today. It's about God's kingdom, so that Jesus calls us to name it and claim it; to go for it full steam ahead and cry with joy, like Joshua, "Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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