

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

C: 15th Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 25/ Proper 20
Luke 16:1-13

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Salem, Bridgeport

“The COST of Discipleship”

There are likely few passages in the scripture more challenging to understand than this parable, because in it, it appears that Jesus is telling us to be dishonest, & somehow that doesn't seem to fit with Jesus' ethics! I've only ever heard two explanations that make any sense to me at all. One is that Jesus was simply having fun with his audience, joking around and saying preposterous things, in order to lighten the mood and open people up before he laid on them the hard truth of what he really wanted to say, i.e., that you can trust in God or in money but you can't trust in both. The problem with that interpretation is that you would think that the gospel writer would have had enough sense to mention the fact that Jesus was joking, which he doesn't...

...which leaves us with the other interpretation has to do with social justice. In this interpretation the master is the Empire, the System with a capital S, that includes all of the other systems that control us, such as government and business and societal norms and systems of injustice like racism and classism and sexism and ageism and ableism. I've preached a lot lately about social justice, and I don't feel that's what I'm called to share with you today, so if you want to talk about the parable I'm happy to do so after worship, but for now I just want to look at the crucial verse in which Jesus says, *“You cannot serve God and wealth”*.

Now I would bet that for every one of us our automatic response is to say, “But we do serve God and not wealth!” And yet, what if God were to say to you, “Go, sell everything that you have, and follow me”? Would you do it? Honestly, I'm still a LONG way away from being that true of a disciple who could give it all away and depend 100% on God.

The truth is that we all put our trust in money all the time.

We buy life insurance policies; we have insurance on our homes and on our vehicles and maybe even on other things.

Some of us have put some money away in retirement accounts.

Most of us have accumulated some money through Social Security.

So, in many ways, most, if not all of us, put at least some of our trust in money.

And I doubt if there's any one of us who is here today or who is listening to this sermon somewhere else or sometime in the future

who is ready to give away everything that they have and simply trust God.

To do that we would have to have as much faith as Jesus had.

But just because we don't have 100% faith doesn't mean that we don't have some.

And no matter how small or great our faith, we all have room to grow.

No matter where we are on our faith journey, we all have farther to go.

Well before you stop listening to this sermon about money, let me make it clear that this isn't my idea!

It's scripture, it's the Bible, it's Jesus saying, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

In fact if you look at everything that Jesus talked about, you will find that he talked about money more than anything else.

And so if I am to be a faithful pastor, I actually should be talking about money more than anything else, too.

I actually don't, but I certainly can't be a faithful pastor if I don't talk about it at all,

let alone when it is the assigned gospel reading for today.

Most of you here, maybe many of you who are listening out there in cyberspace,

know that this congregation has sold its property for a good chunk of change and so we have money in the bank.

What you may not know is that member giving is down.

One explanation is that members may think that because we have money in the bank there is no longer any need for them to give.

But I'm sure that if you have been around for my pastorate or the previous pastorate, or maybe even pastorates before that, you have heard that stewardship, the way we manage our money, the way we determine how much to give back to God, is not determined by the needs of the congregation, because giving is not about funding the congregational budget.

Member giving has nothing to do with the church's need to receive, but rather the members' need to give.

The reason Jesus talked so much about money and giving is that giving is part of our spiritual discipline.

And the percentage of the income that we give is a measure of our spiritual health—not the only measure, but a critical one.

Think about when you get your annual physical at the doctor's office.
Someone takes your blood pressure and your pulse
and they then they run blood tests to measure your cholesterol and your sugar and all kinds of other things.
And when you get those results you're shown where your number is along the scale
and whether or not it falls within the healthy range.
If your blood pressure is not in the healthy range, your physical health is in danger;
if your sugar levels or cholesterol levels are not in the healthy range, your physical health is in danger.
Now you can be angry at the doctor or the lab technicians or at the results that you were given,
but that would be crazy right?

Because the whole point of going for a physical checkup is to see if you are healthy or if your health is in danger.
The Bible teaches us that there are ways to measure our spiritual health,
just as there are ways to measure our physical health.
And one of those ways is what percentage of our money we give back to God.
Just like those physical tests that tell us what is within the healthy range and what is not,
the Bible gives us some numbers that determine whether we are in a healthy range spiritually or not.
Now again, this is only one test for spiritual health among many others:
Are you gathering with your congregation for worship?
Are you gathering with your congregation to study the Bible?
Are you gathering with your congregation to pray?
Are you finding time every day in your personal life to praise God, to pray to God, and to study God's word?
Are you giving of your time and your talent as well as your treasure?
Are the fruits of the Spirit – love and joy, peace and patience, faithfulness and goodness.
kindness and gentleness and self-control – evident to everyone who knows you?
There are numerous measures of spiritual health, but for today we are just going to look at one about giving.

And what scripture tells us is that the minimum that we are asked to return to God is 10%.
Now if you want to argue that that's in the Old Testament and doesn't apply,
remember that in the New Testament we hear Jesus and the apostles calling for Christians to give 100%!
So it may be better for us to begin with the Old Testament's teaching on tithing.
It doesn't matter whether your congregation can't pay its bills or whether it has millions of dollars in the bank,
that has nothing absolutely nothing to do with your spiritual health.
If you are a member of a congregation you should be tithing to that congregation.
and if you can't right now then let's talk and we'll set up a plan to get you there.
Please don't hear this as judgment, because no matter where we are in our walk of faith,
each and every one of us has room to grow.
Talking about tithing is just like looking at your blood pressure
and if it's not where it should be, you can't be spiritually healthy,
and if you're not spiritually healthy, then you're not living the abundant life that Jesus is offering.
Now you may say that giving 10% of your income is impossible
and that it's crazy for a congregation or a pastor to ask that of you.
But if that's what you're thinking then the devil has twisted your mind
because it is possible and it is the right thing to do and it's not crazy
because there are tons of churches where people to tithe.
Back when I was at Tabor the congregations in the conference all did a survey
to determine what percentage of income their members were giving to church on average.
Most of the other congregations, including Tabor, were giving in the 1-2% range.
Only one gave more than 4%. Any idea which one? Resurrection Lutheran Mission
where most of the members were living below the poverty line.
Here at the Seventh Day Adventist church that owns our building
all of their tithes & the tithes of every other congregation in their NY/CT/MA/RI conference
go to their conference & then the conference pays their pastors so every pastor is paid according to the same scale.
It doesn't matter if they serve a small congregation or a large one,
or a poor one or a wealthy one, they all get paid a lot according to the same scale.
I asked them how many members of the congregation actually tithed.
The answer was 90-95% and ALL of those tithes go to their conference.
Everything else that they pay for comes from the offerings that people give on top of their tithe.

The truth is that it is in the churches where people tithe that spiritual health and vitality is high,
Now that may sound like law and judgment to you,
but let me assure you that it is not at all the case, for tithing is all about gospel and grace.

Let me close by telling you a story about a man named Jerry.

Jerry was a lay member of his church and Jerry and his wife, Jane, tithed.

And they found joy in tithing.

In fact it gave Jerry such joy that he used to accompany the synod stewardship director
on visits to other congregations.

He did this for years,

sharing with others the story of his journey to tithing that the joy that it brought him.

Now Jerry had a job in the corporate world but there came a day when he lost that job
and he struggled to find another one.

His wife, too, had lost hers and she, too, remained unemployed.

And as the time passed and they depleted their savings, things got difficult and challenging.

Their congregation knew they were struggling and so they prayed in their private prayers for them,
but didn't see that there was anything else that they could do.

And then that fall there came a Sunday when Jerry was traveling out of state for a job interview,
and the new stewardship director for the synod was visiting their home congregation
and making a presentation at their adult forum.

And in the course of the presentation, the stewardship director
began to get pushback from the people that were there.

He was asking too much. Their congregation wasn't rich. They were people who were struggling.

Finally, one of the members said, "Look, you've even made Jane cry!"

All heads turned towards Jane and yes, tears were indeed streaming down her face.

And someone said,

"See! Her husband lost his job & they're struggling & you're making her feel guilty!"

The Stewardship Director turned towards her but before he could speak, Jane spoke.

"I am crying," she said "that's obvious. But it's not for the reason you think.

Yes, Jerry hasn't been employed for a very long time

and you know I lost my job two years ago too and I haven't been able to find one,
so yes, we are struggling.

But here's what you don't know. We still tithe. Not because we have to, but because we want to.

We tithe because we love God so much

that returning to God just 10% of all God's given to us is the LEAST we can do!

I'm crying not because I'm upset or hurt or worried, but because I am so grateful to God

and because I am so sorry for any of you who don't understand what a joy it is to tithe."

God commands us to tithe, not to make life difficult or to make us feel bad.

God commands us to tithe, because tithing leads us to faith and hope and joy –
and the abundant life Jesus offers.

Jesus gives us a choice.

I want to choose the path to joy.

What about you? Amen