

Luke 16:1-13  
2016  
Year C - proper 20  
Beyond Wealth

Sept. 18,

*"You cannot serve God and Wealth."* Familiar words in Scripture: serve one or the other, but not both. We know the story of Moses, Aaron and the golden calf – when Moses ascended the mountain to talk with God and did not return for a long time, the Israelites believed that the God of Moses had abandoned them. They melted all their gold down to form a golden calf to worship instead. Ex. 32:1-6.

Worshiping the golden calf – putting wealth first in your life, making it your first priority – gets in the way of serving God. Remember the first commandment – *You shall have no other gods before Me*, in the words of Exodus 20:2, Putting wealth as your first priority destroys your relationship with God.

Relationship with God lies *beyond* wealth. God is not against wealth, per se. Consider the abundance of resources God bestows on this earth. Abundance is a characteristic of God's creation. The problem comes when we try to capture that abundance for ourselves in an exclusionary way, and in doing so deprive others of access. Then, we are putting the acquisition of wealth in place of our relationship with neighbor. Relationship with neighbor lies *beyond* wealth.

The commandment to love one's neighbors requires us to take responsibility for the equitable distribution of the abundant resources which God has given us. We hear that responsibility in the teachings about almsgiving and reserving edges of the fields for the poor to glean, in admonitions to care for the widows and orphans. Jesus directs the disciples, 'if someone asks for your cloak, give him your cloak and your tunic, too.'

Jesus teaches the right use of wealth, to be responsive to the needs of others.

Jesus frequently railed at the first century's unjust economic system. The peasant class was becoming poorer. Often, they were disinherited of their family lands by the weight of debts they could not pay.

Although today's parable is often referred to as the parable of 'the dishonest manager,' the parable begins, *'there was a rich man.'* Both the manager *and* the rich landowner are exposed as unethical participants in an unjust system.

In Jesus' day, wealthy landlords collected exorbitant interest rates by rolling them into the principal amount – hidden interest that the peasants (mostly illiterate) would not even know they were being charged. Thus, the rich man's wealth was 'dishonest wealth' - wealth acquired by dishonest means. We might use the term 'ill-gotten gains'. The manager was paid out of the rich man's 'tainted' or 'dishonest' wealth. They both benefitted by the system.

According to New Testament scholar William Herzog, the hidden interest rates in the first century were as much as 25 percent for money and 50 percent for goods. Then, there was a substantial tax owed to the Roman government, which was also rolled into the debt. All of these costs were passed on to the peasant debtor.

A modern-day equivalent might be predatory payday loan practices – which carry an interest rate up to 300 percent. The lender may try to debit the borrower's bank account for payment. The borrower then incurs bank overdraft charges – you can see the hopeless cycle of debt. I was astounded to discover that many of these short term high interest loans are now taken out on line, according to Consumer Reports magazine. Predatory, yes: taking advantage of ignorance and taking advantage of the needs of the poor.

The manager – the debt collector for the rich man – is caught 'squandering'. We don't know exactly what that means, but most likely, something like collecting 'vig', taking too big a cut, or a kick-back from the debtors. He had his hand in the till, so to speak, another dishonest practice. When the rich man calls him to account, the manager retaliates by compromising the still-outstanding debts, collecting less than is owed and calling the debts paid.

The effect of reducing the debts was to forgive (most of) the hidden interest and eliminate what the manager might otherwise have collected for himself. In short, the manager reduces the loans to the amount actually borrowed.

Although the text does not say, if the rich man were a Jew, he knew that the Torah's teaching forbade charging interest (that's in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy). But he did it anyway. When the rich man commends his steward, perhaps he is expressing his gratitude for correcting that wrong. More likely, the rich man recognizes the goodwill earned by discounting the existing loans.

The manager faces a forced retirement, no severance package. He is no longer strong enough to work in the fields, and is ashamed to beg. The steward is *not* ashamed of how he has profited in the past. His decision to compromise the debts is entirely self-serving – he wants the people to feel indebted to him and befriend him in his advancing years. That's his 'quid pro quo.' His ulterior motives poison his seemingly generous gesture.

Despite their motivations, the manager and the rich man give new hope to the people who were drowning in debt.

So what should we conclude? The manager, by his individual actions, tries to undo the economic system in a Robin Hood like fashion. Robin Hood stole from the rich, and took his own cut for living expenses – his own brand of dishonesty. The first century economic structures (like our modern day economic systems) made an ethical life difficult, if not impossible, for some people.

The problem is not new: an economic system that *privileges* the rich also impoverishes the poor. It divides us into a class structure, it separates us as have and have not. The *acquisition* of wealth

– the way we go about acquiring wealth – often exploits the vulnerable.

A lover of money – that is, a worshiper of wealth – is not necessarily a wealthy person, but one who neglects the poor for the sake of one's own status and comfort. A lover of money puts *acquiring* wealth in place of relationship. Both the manager and the rich man put the acquisition of wealth first, and they used dishonest means to gain more. Jesus exposes the unethical behavior, the illegal behaviors, the unfaithful behaviors that the obsession with acquiring more wealth engenders.

What is the right use of wealth?

After telling this story, Jesus says, *'Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth' 'Be faithful with the dishonest wealth'*. Now what does he mean by that?

I hear it this way: make friends by giving back whatever you have acquired dishonestly, and by refusing to profit from dishonest wealth. Dishonesty in the parable includes charging interest contrary to the Torah, profiteering, charging vig or kick-backs, inflating debts by hidden charges. Be faithful to the commandment to love your neighbor by dealing fairly with your neighbor.

Today's Gospel asks us to look at the connections between wealth, resources and relationships in our own lives.

How are our relationships economically determined? Do we see class issues, perhaps excessive consumer debt incurred to achieve a desired status in community, inequalities summed up in the expression 'you need money to make money'?

Where do you see 'dishonest wealth'? Ill-gotten gain? What about false insurance claims, or tax returns that exaggerate deductions or avoid reporting income? An inheritance accumulated through unfair labor practices. What else?

We can be 'faithful with dishonest wealth' by refusing to take advantage of others in economic transactions, by refusing to accept the benefits of unfair transactions or unfair labor practices, by exposing such practices — and by teaching the right use of wealth.

We can change predatory loan practices with legislation. We can expose high prices inflated by many layers of profit-taking. Supporting consumer education is another way to initiate changes — understanding, for example, that the enticing 'cash back' offer on a major purchase becomes a hidden charge in the loan arrangement. You can be pretty sure that the benefits afforded to a 'preferred customer' are paid for by the rest of the customers.

How do our younger generations think about wealth, and the acquisition of wealth? What messages do they receive from advertising, from their elders? What are the parents' goals when they mortgage their home to pay for an expensive college education for their child, or the goals

of the students who take out enormous college loans? Is the end game to find a way to ‘make the big bucks,’ or to find a career that is personally satisfying? Is their interest in learning a skill, trade, profession that will make the world a better place or help others? Or, making lots of money.

How often do we talk about what lies beyond wealth?

Jesus says, you cannot serve God and wealth.

In the parable, the manager belatedly learns that relationships are more important for his future than money. The rich man recognizes the good will benefit of dealing fairly with others. That’s a start.

To serve God faithfully, we must look beyond wealth.

God’s kingdom, the vision of restored relationships, lies *beyond* wealth.

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