

Lectionary 28 + October 14, 2018

Following today's first service will we have (or had) a special congregational meeting to vote on the acquisition of a parsonage. It's a vote that necessitates a discussion about money. Beginning next Sunday, we will have a string of weekly announcements about Consecration Sunday in mid-November. That's the day we make our financial pledges for the next year. Oh, and by the way we have the annual meeting in January where we approve a budget and in the not-so-distant future we may be embarking upon a capital campaign.

Phew! That's a lot of talk about money. Is it possible that, at times, the church talks about money too much?

I don't think so ...

Talk and use of money and possessions is necessary, particularly when we discern the mission of God and our role in God's mission. Besides, Jesus talked about money and possessions all the time and Jesus describes for us both the peril and the promise of money and possessions.

The peril? when money and possessions become the primary focus of our lives. The promise? In our freedom we may use money and possessions to serve and glorify God.

The fellow in the Gospel story today is very devout. He's a lover of God. In fact, he has faithfully kept the commandments all his life. Yet, he wants to receive some of Jesus' wisdom, so he asks: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responds by speaking the truth in love: "Go, sell all you have and give the money to the poor ... then, come and follow me."

It seems that for this man of great wealth, his possessions have become all-consuming and an impediment in his relationship with God. So, Jesus tells him to give them up, to let them go.

Jesus tells him that life in God is not about this fellow adding one more thing or doing one more thing in his already obedient life or to try to be good. Rather, it's about surrendering, letting go ... and in his case, letting go of that which impedes his trust in God. His possessions have become his idol, the locus of his trust. He has put his trust in them. He cannot make that leap of letting go. He walks away shocked and sad.

Jesus is prodding this fellow to renounce his idol.

Every time we celebrate Baptism in this Assembly we renounce idols. We join those about to be baptized in the renunciations – renouncing the powers

that defy God, the systems that rebel against God, the ways of sin that draw us away from God. It's all rather dramatic. We lift our voices and even shake a fist crying out "I renounce them."

We renounce idols and the powers and systems that hold us captive to them – racism, sexism, violence, greed, you can add to the list. We can add to the list. I wonder if money and possessions show up a lot on the list. Not money and possessions in and of themselves but how we use them or how we regard them. Please understand that money and things are gifts from God and part of their use is for our enjoyment. What we begin to renounce at the baptismal waters is what Jesus describes as the peril of money and possessions – when they end up defining us.

This last year I've convinced myself that I need a new car. Little things go wrong, and I say, "I need a new car!" My wife helps me reframe it by saying, "No, you want a new car." The last incident was just a few days ago when I blew out a tire. I said it again, "I need a new car!" Britt wondered if the place where I got the tires wouldn't replace this for free per the guarantee. Sure enough. A new tire and the total cost was \$18. I was duped into believing I needed something that I really don't yet need.

It should not be a surprise. We are consumers after all. It is the air we breathe, and we end up spending a lot of time and energy into pining after personal preferences. Don't we get the message all the time?

- Love is what makes a Subaru.
- Open a coke you open happiness.
- If you get a VISA card it's priceless.
- A cruise line was recently promising paradise.
- My personal favorite is from a sign at a local jewelry store: "Love eternally. Pay monthly."

It's insidious. These messages shape our attitudes and our behaviors.

The great irony is that the more we accumulate or acquire the deeper we go into an attitude of scarcity. And scarcity thinking wants us to believe that we never have enough. Those who don't have much, in my experience, are more often those who dwell in an attitude of abundance. Those with too much get ensconced in scarcity thinking.

That's the peril when we give money and possessions too much power. The promise is that we may use our money and our stuff to glorify God by loving our neighbor.

When Jesus says to the man in the Gospel reading, "go, sell what you have and give to the poor..." he is asking him to renounce his idol before he takes the plunge into new life and new freedom by pledging a new and fresh allegiance.

Baptism is about a change of allegiance – a new allegiance to Jesus who says you cannot serve God and mammon.

So, we renounce the lies that say

- greed is good
- human worth is determined by what we have or what we own
- money and things are private property
- or the lies peddled by the prosperity gospel preachers who wants us to believe that the more you have the more blessed you are by God

We must renounce these lies. And in all humility, we must confess that we are complicit in the very things we renounce.

Well, then, who can be saved? Well, it's impossible. Impossible for any of us. Then, in what I believe to be one of the funniest lines in the entire Bible, Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. I recall a cartoon, some years back, where a camel is sitting down and in one hand the camel holds the end of his tail and in the other he holds a needle. The camel is perplexed moving his head back and forth between the end of his tail and the eye of the needle.

It's impossible but, with God all things are possible.

So, we relinquish trusting in ourselves and we turn to Jesus again and again. And Jesus gives us treasures in the form of practices, behaviors, ways to live and practice putting our trust in God – practices like tithing, remembering the poor, making sacrifices, being generous and exercising a love that casts our fear.

I'll never forget the council meeting in another parish where someone was making an impassioned plea for money for the mission trip to take place. They lacked just so much and if they didn't get the necessary funds the trip would not happen. We could have spent all night wringing our hands about this or that strategy but, thanks be to God, one of the council members pulled out her checkbook and wrote the check and said "here." Folks were shocked by this amazing act of generosity. No one walked away sad or grieving. Instead they were illumined by her generous impulse.

That's how Jesus surprises us, expanding our world by pointing us always into the direction of the world of the neighbor.

Last Wednesday in the 7th grade confirmation class we explored the story of God's people spending 40 years in the wilderness. We're talking about it as wilderness school where God is teaching all kinds of lessons about what it means to be God's people. It's the part of the story where God rains down manna from heaven, enough for everyone but some of the people decided to hoard the manna. Lured by the desire to have the most. The hoarded

mana though drew maggots and spoiled and began to stink. What's the lesson? Hoarding stinks.

Still, all the world struggles eradicating that stench. Will we ever get it right? Not likely. That would be like a camel going through the eye of a needle.

Ah, but with God all things are possible. So, we turn to Jesus again and again and Jesus does not disappoint as he pries us away from our idols and continues to faithfully gather us around his table to share cup and share bread in a most radical and loving gesture. Manna for all. Bread for all. And it is enough! Amen.