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The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

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Good morning, St. Anne's! How wonderful it is to be with you all this morning. It was a real pleasure to meet many of you at the lovely reception after church last week, and I want to thank Kay and Lise and probably others whom I don't know about who organized that really terrific welcoming event.

If we haven't met yet, I'm Joe, the new curate of this church. And I'm sure it goes without saying that it's every preacher's dream for the Gospel passage of their very first sermon in their new parish to be totally focused on *money*—everyone's favorite topic, I am sure. But as generally uncomfortable as we all tend to be with financial sermons, I do think that this passage is actually quite important, because while the topic at a primary/surface level is clearly money, Jesus is actually saying something much deeper here: he's not only talking about money but is communicating a deeper, more profound, and really more essential message about what real life, true life—the life he comes to give us—is all about.

And so I would like to invite you to join me this morning as we take a brief but deep dive into this important passage, and to do so, I want to draw our attention to the three Rs of this passage: not reading, writing, and arithmetic, but rather a **Request**, a **Refusal**, and finally a somewhat shocking **Rebuke**.

Now, first of all, a **Request**: at the beginning of the passage, Jesus is in the middle of teaching his disciples, and they are surrounded by large crowds. While Jesus is teaching, someone in the crowd calls out to him with a request: "Hey Jesus," the man shouts, "I've got an inheritance problem here and I need you to tell my brother to give me my fair share." And Jesus, being the kind-hearted, altruistic guy that he is, says, "No problem, I'm here to solve all your financial and family problems—right?" No, quite the opposite: Jesus' response to the man's request is rather surprising but also very important, because it says a lot about how Jesus understood himself and his mission on Earth. Let's look carefully at his response, which is really a **Refusal**. Our translation is a little bit generous and makes Jesus look nicer than he really is here, because in the original Greek, Jesus does not reply "Friend..." Instead, he cries out, "Man!" He says, "O man! Who set me—or appointed me—to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" Now, as the well-known Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller points out in a classic analysis of this passage from about 30 years ago, the term here for "arbitrator" really means something

like “divider.” And so Jesus is asking the man, “Who appointed me to divide between you and your brother?” Now, this question is really important, because Jesus clearly implies that he is not a divider, that doing this work of dividing is not what he has been sent to do. But—and this is really the crucial point—Jesus’ claim here that he is not a divider directly contrasts what he will say just a little later in this very same chapter (Luke 12): in v. 51, Jesus boldly states: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” So, in v. 15, he says “Hey, man, I’m not a divider!” and then in v. 51, he says, “The whole reason I’m here on Earth is to divide. I have not come as a peacemaker, but rather as a divider.”

What is going on here? Why does Jesus seemingly contradict himself around this issue of his role and mission? Jesus is crystal clear that he’s not a divider in one sense, but he is fundamentally a divider in another sense, so what does he mean? On the one hand, Jesus tells the man who calls out to him that his role is really not to be an arbitrator, a divider, with respect to the petty financial affairs of everyday life. Instead, Jesus’ role is to be an arbitrator, a divider, in the sense of dividing life itself, reality itself, into what is truly worthwhile and what is worthless. His mission, persistently and constantly, is to wake people out of their sleepwalking lives, living with attachments to things that are superficial and ultimately worthless. He is constantly highlighting this emptiness and superficiality and dividing it away from what truly matters, what truly endures, what in a phrase is “the kingdom of God.” In short, most fundamentally, Jesus’ role and purpose—both 2,000 years ago and today—is not to improve the physical conditions of our lives; Jesus’ role instead is to be our life, our new life, our real life: to be a crystal-clear voice of division for us between life that is superficial and temporary, and life that is real, true, and eternal.

And so, in order to be a divider in this sense, Jesus tells the man a parable, and this parable brings us to our third and final “R”: **Rebuke**. And this is the “R” that I want to focus on the most this morning. On the surface of it, the farmer in Jesus’ parable doesn’t seem to be doing a whole lot wrong. He’s a successful farmer; he grows a lot of crops, more crops than he anticipated, and so in order to hold all of his produce, he builds new and bigger barns. Then he looks at his vast storehouses, and he takes pleasure in them, and tells himself that he’s got enough to last

for years, so “relax, eat, drink, be merry.” This guy sounds like a hardworking, industrious man, who’s simply enjoying the fruits of his labor, so what’s wrong with that? Why, in the parable, does God call him a fool?

Jesus’ point is not that the farmer’s wealth is somehow intrinsically evil; Jesus never says that. But rather, the problem seems to be that this man has allowed his financial success to blind him to the nature of real life. In short, the man’s wealth has caused a spiritual blindness/shallowness, where he foolishly thinks that life is only about this material existence and his present physical enjoyment. Wealth has blinded this man to the spiritual and eternal dimensions of real life, leading him to give no thought to anything that might endure beyond the grave.

When I was in second grade—this was at a small Lutheran grade school just outside of Chicago—a representative from a local bank came to my class one day to talk with us about bank accounts. And at the end of her talk, she gave each of us a brochure that promised if our parents opened a savings account on our behalf in this lady’s bank, then the bank would contribute ten whole dollars into each of those accounts. So I took the brochure home and told my mother, and she said, “Good idea. I’ve been meaning to open a college savings account for you, and this ten dollars from the bank will help to get it started.” Once I heard that she was going to open this account and that basically I was gonna get a free ten bucks, I said to my mom, “Great, so can I take the free ten dollars and buy baseball cards?” And, of course, my mother replied, “No—you’re not gonna empty this account that we just started for your college education in order to buy baseball cards.” As a second-grader, my whole life was the Chicago Cubs and baseball cards; I couldn’t conceive of life being much more than baseball and second grade, and I certainly couldn’t grasp life being about college or saving for college, which seemed light-years away in a different galaxy altogether. But my mother understood that life is about a lot more than the immediate gratification of buying baseball cards. She understood that it’s foolish to liquidate your week-old bank account to buy some flimsy cards because life—real life, true life—is about a whole lot more than baseball. It’s not that it’s intrinsically wrong to “relax, be merry, and buy baseball cards,” but it’s just that in the light of what life is really about—growing up, getting an education, saving for the future—spending all your money on

baseball cards is a foolish thing to do.

Now, truth be told, I highly doubt that any of us here this morning have felt the urge recently to liquidate our bank accounts for the sake of baseball cards. That's a pretty obviously shortsighted use of money. Our financial questions—questions that intersect finances and faith—tend to be much more subtle and nuanced, but they still connect to this basic issue of what life—real life, true life, the life of Christ—is really about: we might wonder, for example, if it is okay, as a Christian, to buy the nicer car when a more economic one works just fine. Is it okay, as a follower of Jesus, to take a vacation on some distant tropical beach when we could, more cheaply, just drive down to the Cape? Or, as a member of the men's Bible study asked this past Wednesday, does Jesus care whether I upgrade from a 55-inch TV to a 65-inch TV? The basketball appears a little bit larger when watching Celtics games on the 65-inch TV, but might Jesus want me to use that money instead on something more spiritually worthwhile: helping the poor, helping the Church, helping someone other than myself?

There are no easy answers to these serious spiritual questions. At the end of the day, it often comes down to a matter of personal conscience, and unfortunately even our conscience is not always reliable because of our well-developed capacities for self-deception. When we really want that nicer TV, we easily come up with all kinds of ways to justify buying it: I've worked hard for this TV; I "deserve" this TV; and even spiritual-sounding justifications: this giant TV is so nice and big; it would help me be a better Christian because I can invite more people over to watch basketball; the Great Commission will be advanced by getting a new TV, so Jesus must want me to have it. We humans are endlessly creative and very skilled at self-deception and self-serving justifications, especially when it comes to wealth and possessions.

But while there are no easy answers when facing these kinds of decisions at the crossroads of faith and finances, it really does help, I believe, to come back to Jesus' actual words as a foundational touchstone and a centering point. Returning to our passage from Luke, for example, wealth, Jesus cautions, has a tendency to distort our vision of real life, so do not let it blind you into thinking that a fulfilled life—true life, the life available in Jesus—is one in which we use money merely to fulfill our

immediate desires, merely to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” There’s nothing inherently wrong, in other words, with upgrading your TV set, but be very careful that you don’t reduce your life to the mere, fleeting pleasure of owning bigger and bigger TVs. Life—especially life in Jesus—is so much more than that. Jesus invites us instead to steward wealth with an eye to the eternal dimensions of life: what really endures? What kinds of investments can we make that enhance the life that transcends death? As God asks the rich man, “All the wealth you’ve stored up, now at the hour of your death, whose will it all be?” The man lived as if only this earthly life were real, with no thought of what comes after death, and so he put all his financial investments into improving the quality and ease of his present, physical life. But this caused him to overlook the eternal aspect of life; it caused him, in short, to be spiritually foolish.

And so Jesus tells this story to the man with the inheritance dispute in order to adjust this man’s perspective. This man is so focused on enhancing his earthly resources that Jesus rebukes him saying, “Don’t be so blind. You need a much broader, wiser perspective about what real life is all about. Be rich towards God,” Jesus exhorts him. In other words, “This physical existence is short, so don’t get distracted by living for it. Rather, invest in eternal things, efforts/activities/endeavors whose impact doesn’t stop at the grave; investments in churches that build up people’s spirits, investments in communities that improve the quality of life for generations to come, investments in people, investments in the kingdom of God, both of which last forever.”

And, in conclusion, Jesus responds to us just as he responded to that man who called out to him 2,000 years ago. We love to come to Jesus with our problems, and it’s totally appropriate to do so. Jesus cares about our problems, but his response to us—as to the man in today’s reading—often challenges what we expect and what we want to hear. How often, like the man in the story, do we come to Jesus and say, “You know, Jesus, I really have a problem with this other person: this guy at work or this difficult family member. So could you just tell him, or tell her, to shape up? Could you just, like, fix this other person so they’re not a problem to me anymore?” It’s fine to pray that kind of prayer, but don’t be surprised when Jesus doesn’t respond in the way you expect or want. As in this morning’s passage, Jesus is much more likely to say, “Man! Woman! Friend! Joe!... that’s really not what my

purpose is in your life. I'm very interested in being an arbitrator, a divider, but not in the way you think, not to advance the quality of your physical existence over against others." Instead, Jesus comes as a divider to help us recognize the difference between the meaningless life of selfish, shortsighted, superficial living and his real, true, deep, joyous, abundant life where we devote our short, earthly existence for eternal purposes, eternal ends, being rich towards God, in the efforts that last forever.

As we send out our requests to Jesus, may we heed his still, small voice—even his refusals and rebukes—as Jesus persistently urges us away from a life that is too shallow, too selfish, and too empty, and invites us instead to invest our resources and our very selves in the joyful and eternal purposes of his everlasting kingdom.

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