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The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

“The Gospel for the Rich”

Luke 16:1-13



The question that has emerged for me over the last few weeks as I've been reading Luke is a rather difficult one: *Is there a gospel for the rich?* It's a difficult question but one that surely applies to every one of us. When I was at seminary, a wise colleague who'd formerly been a high school teacher advised me on how to tackle my assignments. He said "There's always three answers to every question, 'Yes,' 'No,' and 'Maybe,' and the answer's nearly always 'Maybe.'" Is there a gospel for the rich? The answer the New Testament gives to this question seems to be, "Maybe."

To say "No" implies there's something inherently dirty about money. It suggests that every cent the rich have is taken directly out of the pockets of the poor. It seems to represent a kind of anger that assumes what God really wants is for everyone to be miserable. But simply to say "Yes" is to ignore the blasting the rich seem to get in the four gospels, especially Luke. It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, remember, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. And here in today's gospel: No one can serve God and Mammon, which is more forceful in the Greek: you can't be enslaved to both God and Mammon. So the answer to the question 'Is there a gospel for the rich?' has to be, "Maybe." Today I want to explore some of the questions raised by that "Maybe."

Let's start with the parable we have this morning. There is a rich man, a master, who has appointed a manager to oversee his property, and a charge is phoned in against him that he's been cooking the books. When the master slams down the phone, you can imagine, smoke coming out of his ears as he roars out his manager's name, summoning him. And notice his speech. He says, "What is this I hear about you? Render the account of your stewardship." And then without pausing for a reply, in a fit of fury, he fires him. No chance to explain what really happened; no moment for clarification; or learning what was really going on. Well, now the manager is in a bind. He has a wife and a family and bills to pay. He's spent his entire life working for the master. And now he experiences what is so often experienced by those who've lost a job: shame. In our world where many people are their work, to lose one's job is to lose one's identity. "I'm too ashamed to beg," he says to himself. This is when his crafty plot sets in.

He starts calling in the workers in debt to the master and he,

without anyone's permission, starts easing their debts, acting shrewdly. And then there is this mysterious gesture where the master praises the recently fired servant. He let the servant go in a huff, but now he's had a conversion, you might say, and makes a realization. The shrewd servant has shown the wealthy master something that he has forgotten. The lesson: well, Jesus offers his own interpretation when he says, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon."

The Master, perhaps, had forgotten that. Now this line about God and Mammon is particularly difficult, because where we'd like there to be ambiguity and discernment on our finances, Jesus doesn't leave much space. Make a choice. But there is wisdom in Jesus' directness. Perhaps he knows that wealth, while not entirely evil, inclines you to forget what is most important. For starters, it inclines us to forget God and other people.

Let's dig into this a little more and start with God. When you have a lot of money, the assumption is easy to make that money can solve pretty much all your irritations and frustrations. Don't like vacuuming? Pay someone to clean your house. Think your children could get a better education? Pay for one. Not impressed with your health care? Pay for a second opinion. Find long journeys tedious? Buy a nicer car with a purring stereo or even better acquire a private jet. It begins to seem like there's nothing money can't buy. Except of course the things that really matter.

There's nothing wrong with being rich so long as you remember that the things that really matter money can't buy. Money can't buy the forgiveness of sins. Money can't buy the faith that moves mountains, money can't buy the hope that walks in rhythm with God's step, money can't buy the love that will not let you go. These are things that everyone can have but no one can buy. The poor are blessed because on the whole they know this. The rich can sometimes become a little forgetful.

And then when it comes to other people, wealth can have a poisoning effect. If you have no possessions, other people are all you have, and you're well advised to keep on pretty good terms with them because you know you're going to need them sooner rather than later, immediately anything goes wrong. But if you have great wealth, great property and great possessions, other people can quickly stop being potential friends and even saviors,

and on the contrary become potential threats and enemies who could rob or steal or mooch on what you have. Instead of looking at friends with hope you start to look at strangers with fear. Quickly you start to defend your property with alarms and fences and big dogs, and you find you can't trust anybody because everyone you meet wants something from you. You get further and further away from real human contact with the people who you pay to make your life better and it gets harder and harder to make genuine relationships and friendships with them or indeed anybody. This is how wealth can make you forget God and thus live in a fantasy of your own immortality and meanwhile wealth can make you forget other people and thus live in a prison of your own self-sufficiency.

Okay, so there's your bad news about wealth. But our question this morning is if there is any good news. And to get at that question we've got to get at a more fundamental question, a question that seems to me the explicit meaning of this parable. Did you notice – the rich master commends the manager for acting shrewdly, or maybe prudently? Another translation would be wisely. The sneaky manager has wisdom. He doesn't have resources, not anymore, but he realizes something essential, and his actions raise up the key question: what is money's purpose? What is money for?

Money at its heart is potential – it is a valueless object that contains the potential for power. Not good, not bad. And only of value when translated into other things: like fly fishing trips to Canada, a new Tesla, several boxes of tag-a-long cookies. The word we use for money's translation from valueless object to meaningful good is investment. Investment is more than tucking money away in the market; it pertains to every use we have for money. The wise manager gives us an example of taking money from a less than good use – maintaining a rich man's estate – and investing it into the kingdom of God. Did you notice what he did – he freed people from debts; he acted mercifully; and he doubled down not on profits but on friendship? In the same way he showed the master the purpose of money – translating worldly potential into kingdom reality – I want to look to him so that he can guide us in what to do with our money?

The first thing we can do with our money is to give it away to individuals. Somehow how when we hear Jesus say to the rich

man just a few chapters earlier in Luke's gospel, "Go sell what you have, give to the poor and come follow me," we imagine some kind of random distribution of fat wads of cash. However, giving large sums of money to individuals is generally not a good idea. For most, lack of money isn't the main problem. Its lack of relationship and support, without which a huge influx of cash makes little to no difference. Notice, the shrewd manager shows us that money is about building relationship, and unfortunately, for many, writing a check to the poor is often a way to feel good about oneself without having to build a relationship. The gospel for the rich does not mean an unthinking throwing money at the poor.

The second thing we can do with money is to give it to institutions established and governed in such a way that they have a time honored record of turning money into real human value, in education, health, the practice and sharing of arts, or a host of other forums. This isn't stewardship season so we won't talk about the benefits of giving to an institution like a church. We won't talk about how it is a great place to give our treasure, this place that turns the potential of money into the reality of spiritual growth and communal flourishing; that values the poor and the marginalized and the stigmatized, and seeks to be present to four generations of life. But as I said, we won't talk about it.

Third, we can use our money to invest in companies that are in the business of creating a more just and equitable society. Notice, the rich master lives in a top-down hierarchical world: CEO, Manger, Wage Laborers. Classic economic structure. Money flows upstream, from laborer through management to master. But notice the shrewd manager redirects the flow. He re-lieves debts; he disregards the fact that money is meant to flow back to the master. No, money is meant to extend compassion and mercy to those at the bottom. The wise manager invests in the wage earners; what we'd call the working class. Let me ask, do you use your money, your power, your shareholder interest to sway businesses to think first about the weak and the vulnerable ahead of profit motive? Are you creatively looking for ways for a more compassionate economics that reverses the flow of money, from upward to downward? If there is a gospel for the rich, it will entail a reversal of the flow of money.

Finally, we can use our money to invest in property and possessions. One of the things I love most about living in New

England is that those with tremendous amounts of resources don't feel the need to wave it in front of everyone else's face. There's a cultural modesty and under-statedness to wealth here that I find refreshing. And yet, most of us here know the temptation to use our resources to acquire more stuff: new cars, new vacations, new homes, etc., etc. If there is a gospel for the rich, we must be very very cautious about acquisition of more property and possessions. The problem with possessions is that they give you an inflated view of one-self; for whatever you buy with your money is almost like a little mirror showing you a reflection of your own status and power, becoming what psychologists call self-objects. Ironically, the more we seek our self in things, which looks like wealth, is the degree to which our self, our sense of inner self, becomes impoverished. So here's the question, the central discernment question before a big purchase: who would I be without this thing and could I live with that person? This question is key because it shows you how much you are identifying and projecting yourself onto the object of want. If you want an even harder question, try this: Lord, you loaned me everything I have, every cent to my name, is this how you'd have me use my resources?

It's a bold and risky question, but it's the question of one who has wandered out of the Kingdom of Mammon and is learning to live in another kingdom.

I want to finish with one of my favorite stories, which is about faith but like today's gospel could also be about money. I want you to think about what God is saying to you through this story today. A person fell off a cliff and tumbled down into a ravine (aaahhh...) until he just managed to cling on to the branch of a tree growing out of the rock face. Dangling from the branch, and holding on with all his might, he shouted up to the top of the cliff, "Is anybody up there who could help me?" After a short pause a voice came from below him, "My child, I am here. Let go of the branch and I will hold you." The man thought for a while, and then he shouted up again, "Is there anybody else up there?"

