

**Gospel Reading****Luke 16:1-13**

Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

*The True Riches*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

*Psalm 19:14*

This week, I received two phone calls from people who are in desperate need of financial assistance. They were both facing eviction from their homes if they could not come up with some rent money very quickly. As a last resort, they had begun to call churches to see if there was any money available. I have spent a fair amount of my time ministering to the homeless in Baltimore County over the past five years and it is simultaneously a rewarding, overwhelming, and depressing experience. When I get a call from someone who is not yet homeless, but facing the prospect of life on the street, I am very interested to see what I can do. Avoiding homelessness is a lot easier than getting back into a home after living on the street and in shelters, especially if you have children.

As I spoke with one woman I asked her what kind of support network she had. She began to tell me about Department of Social Services and other places that were helping her out financially. I stopped her and said, "I know that you are working very hard to come up with the funds to keep your home. Who is holding your hand and walking through this crisis with you? Who is reassuring you that you don't have to do this alone? Do you have friends and family that can help you get through this?" She began to cry. "You know, I have been calling every church in the phone book to see if someone can help me and the people treat me like dirt, like I'm not a person just because I got sick and lost my job. Thank you for treating me like a human being. I am at my wit's end and all I can think about is the money I owe and how I have to get it."

The property manager in Jesus' parable this morning is about to lose his job, probably his house, and his position in the community. Unlike the people I spoke with this week, this man is losing his job because he is squandering his master's property. He deserves to be fired and now he will either have to dig in the dirt as a laborer, or be treated like dirt as a beggar on the street. Neither of these prospects

looks very good to him. So, he comes up with a plan. Before he gets fired, he meets with all the people who owe a debt to his master. Each of the people mentioned owe a significant amount to the master, for example: 100 jugs of olive oil is about 1800 gallons. When the debtors arrive, the manager forgives their debt significantly and because of his mercy he gains their friendship. By reducing the debt he is causing the master to lose even more property, all for the sake of his own relationships within the community.

Finally, the master discovers what the manager has done and we expect that he will blow up at him in a rage. Not only has this man squandered property, he is now cancelling debts and further reducing the financial wealth of the rich man. In our own day we would call the authorities, have him arrested, and sue him in court for the amount he had squandered and lost plus damages. But not in the parable, Jesus switches it up here and catches us off balance. The master commends the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly. The parable leaves me uncomfortable because I do not like the manager; he is not a sympathetic character. I don't think Jesus even want us to like him, he calls him a "dishonest" manager. So, what does Jesus want us to learn from this unrighteous, dishonest manager?

As I chewed on this parable all week, hoping to discover some nutritious good news in it, I kept coming back to these words, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth". I kept thinking about the woman on the phone who was tired of being treated like dirt by everyone that she begged for money. I thought about this scoundrel of a manager who didn't want to become a beggar on the street. Even though he was an unrighteous manager, the man knew that relationships were more important to him than wealth. Even if he was once again, destroying his master financial situation, the "true riches" he chose was making friends by acting with mercy and forgiveness toward people in need. If we are totally consumed by the accumulation of money, it is very difficult to be faithful to the riches of relationships with other people. We cannot make friends for ourselves if money has become our master.

We usually think about rich people being consumed with wealth, serving mammon and unable to serve God. But there is another way that wealth rules our lives. When we live in constant fear of the scarcity of money, then we can also become slaves to money. When every second is consumed with thoughts of money to pay the rent, to pay BG&E, the phone bill, the grocery bill, then we have no thoughts left for ourselves, or our friends, or God. The woman on the phone had become a slave to money because acquiring it to pay the rent seemed to be her only salvation. She was willing to endure being treated like dirt if it meant that she could pay the rent. This is what slavery does to us, it erases our relationship with God, the creator and image in which we are created, and etches a new master upon our souls, Wealth.

I do not think that the woman facing eviction is to blame for her enslavement to the money needed to pay the rent. And when I spoke with her landlord, he was no tyrant. He was compassionate towards her, especially because she had children. He was trying to give her more time since she owed a substantial amount of rent. The evil that is to blame is found in the very fabric of human society. We believe that financial wealth is more valuable than our relationships with others. If this woman is begging for funds, she must not be worth much and not worth knowing. Our cultural programming tell us that the rich man should be even angrier with the manager at the end of the parable because on some level we do believe that his property and wealth are more valuable than the manager's friendships and need for a community of support. In the Old Testament reading today, Amos convicts his community for the same sins "you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land... buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals." Amos tells them that because they have made wealth their master, they will endure a famine of the Word of God. You cannot serve two masters.

Jesus is telling us that, in God's kingdom and culture, it is faithful even to use dishonest wealth to make friends. In God's accounting firm, forgiving debts is a good financial practice because of the relationships you can build with other people. In God's upside down kingdom, the true riches are to be found in our relationships with one another and with God.

The more I reflected on this notoriously difficult and controversial parable, the more instances I began to see where wealth enslaves us. It is painful to acknowledge, but the church is doubly guilty of serving wealth when we allow our financial status to define our capacity for relationships, faith, and ministry. All you have to do is ask a clergy person to describe the church they are serving and listen, do they describe people, relationships, and ministry or do they talk about attendance, pledge numbers, and budget balances? Whether we are financially flush with funds or struggling for every cent, we must not allow wealth to define us and determine our capacity to be the Body of Christ. Granted, I have only been here two weeks now, but I believe that St. Mark's practice of sharing the peace for an extended period of time is your way of insisting on the primacy of the relationships among you. It is the friendships you have fostered that have made this church overflowing with the true riches of God's Kingdom.

For those of you who are now anxious that your new rector has a Pollyanna perspective on church budget, please, relax. Financial stewardship is a necessary and wonderful part of our life together. We want to worship with scripture, music, and Eucharist. We would like to maintain this beautiful building that is permeated with the prayers of many faithful Christians for over 125 years. We would like to serve those in need and assist to those who are about to be evicted. We want to learn about our faith together and grow deeper in our relationship with God. And you have chosen to call me to come and serve as your rector. None of these things come cheap and all of these expenses must be considered as we plan for the future. We must be good stewards of the gifts we have been given. But in all these things, we serve only one master, we serve God – we do not serve the money required to be the church in the world. If we can remember, then we will be surrounded with true riches because we will not see any limit to our ability to serve God.

As we enter this season of Stewardship and we pray over the ministry of St. Mark's on the Hill, I pray that we will never lose our focus on the true master of our lives, the one who created us for relationship and love, the creator whose image we carry in our very humanity. May we always know that we are here to serve God.

Amen.