

The Color of Money
A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 19th, 2010
Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13

I came across a cartoon recently of a man who has died standing before the proverbial pearly gates. The celestial gatekeeper, sporting wings and a halo, stares down at the man and advises him, "My friend, charitable giving isn't the ultimate test of one's humanity, but it does give us some numbers to play with."

In this very peculiar parable which we hear today, Jesus suggests that how we relate to money is a measure of how we relate to God. You have to admit that this is one of the craziest stories that Jesus ever told concluding with one of the hardest hitting punch-lines ever: "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 the god of wealth."

"Mammon," as it is sometimes translated, from the Greek "Mammonas," was the Syrian god of riches. In this strange parable, along with the story of poor Lazarus next Sunday, Jesus is talking about more than money. He is addressing that anxiety about money which is a disease among both those who have it and those who do not. The antidote which Jesus prescribes is a generous sharing of wealth that can free a person from the danger to the soul lying coiled in the possession of things. The First Letter to Timothy gives clear warning about this disease along with the deadly power of the god of wealth: "But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." You see, the Scriptures never hesitate, as we cowardly preachers do, to use our relationship to money as a measure of our relationship to God.

Note that the story doesn't say that the manager was unethical with the property, it just says that he bottomed out on his performance rating. He was "squandering" his boss's money. So, says the story, the boss calls the inept manager into his office, asks him to show him the books, tells him to clean out his desk "because you can't be my manager any longer. You've messed up for the last time." So far so good, we think. This is justice. This guy gets what he has coming to him. If you don't do your job you get fired.

But the manager won't go quietly. Neither will he require security guards to escort him out of the building. He will go shrewdly, saying to himself, "Self, I'm not strong enough to dig; I'm ashamed to beg; I'm too old to start over; unemployment compensation isn't going to pay the bills. I've got to do something, and I've got to do it quick." And so he does. I imagine that at some fine restaurant with some of his boss's best clients, the manager writes off vast amounts of olive oil and wheat at his boss's expense. Of course, those clients will be the manager's future friends, owing him for the favors he has done for them. Maybe they'll give him a part-time job, maybe a place in the coach house, maybe a position as precinct captain. Not such a strange story in Chicago politics or corporate life, but what a very strange story to find in the Bible.

I can imagine Jesus' audience having a pretty good laugh over this parable. We all like it when the little guy can pull one over on the big boss, unless of course you happen to be the big boss. But here the big boss doesn't seem to mind at all. In fact, he's tickled pink to see just how smart that little manager is. And Jesus concludes, "I tell you, look at this, the children of this age are smarter in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

We all are just managers. None of us owns a single thing in life. You may think you own that Ford Focus, but listen again to something Jesus said previously, "God said to the rich man, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you've piled up, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." Everything we have belongs to Another. You get to use it for a while. The title to the house, the car, the boat, your life belongs to God, not to you.

The question raised by this parable is just what kind of manager are you? Are we faithful in our management of what belongs to God and to God alone? Or, like the little weasel in the parable, are we squandering for ourselves what rightfully belongs to God? I don't think the questions are very difficult to answer. Are we who are "children of light" not expected to do a whole lot better with what belongs to God than those who are "children of this age" who treat what belongs to God as though it was their own. Are we not expected to do more with what belongs to God than simply use it for ourselves? If that's the case, we're no better than this scheming little manager. The "children of light" are no better than the "children of this age."

"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 trust you with the true riches?" "Charitable giving isn't the ultimate test of one's humanity, but it does give us some numbers to play with." "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." Jesus says we ought to be at least as smart and even more courageous in regard to the God whom we claim to care about most.

Think about the way money dominates your life. Some of you spend most of your time day and night trying to get hold of it, all the while it is getting hold on you. No time for the little things: writing a note, visiting a nursing home, sharing a meal, telling a child a story, teaching a Sunday school class, going to choir practice, feeding the neighbor's cat. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." Who gets your attention? Your time? Your action? Your life? The true God or Mammonas?

When I get up in the morning to check the balance of the bank account before offering my morning prayers, I realize that my soul is being strangled in the coils of the god of riches, the disease is progressing a pretty good clip. When this happens, I know that it is time to give it up, to make a significant offering, to send a tuition payment, to help somebody out, to let go of money before it has my life in its grip, like some boa constrictor.

Rabbinic parables like this one about a master and a manager are usually about God the Master and Israel the Manager. Jesus regularly charges his contemporaries with being unfaithful to their management. Following this story, Luke says that "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed Jesus. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.'"

The god of wealth is as black as night in the sight of God. The color of money is anything but green with the color of life. In the rule of God, money is at best insignificant and at worst highly detestable. If you're trying to serve the god of wealth at the same time you're trying to serve the true God, then you're going to hold back, you're not going give your all, and eventually you're going to hate one or the other.

And your heart will show it.

In The Large Catechism, in his explanation to the First Commandment, Luther asks, "What does it mean to have a god? What is God? To have a god means this," he answers, "You expect to receive all good things from it and turn to it in every time of trouble. Yes, to have a god means to trust and to believe in Him with your whole heart. I have often said that only the trust and faith of the heart can make God or an idol. If your faith and trust are true, you have the true God, too. On the other hand, where trust is false, is evil, there you will not have the true God either. Faith and God live together. I tell you, whatever you set your heart on and rely on is really your god."

"Therefore I tell you, don't worry about your life... . Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you... . And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and don't keep worrying... . 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give

offerings for the poor. Make purses for yourselves that don't wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."