

A Spiritual Lifeline

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, September 19, 2010: The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Luke 16:1-13.*

“Jesus said to his disciples, ‘There was a rich man.’ Most of us heave a sigh of relief when we hear this opening. This story isn’t about us; it is about rich people, and on some level we like to see them get their comeuppance. There is just one problem, my friends: we are among them. Certainly in the global sense all of us are rich—or at least rich enough for these passages to make us squirm. We may not feel rich, but by most standards of wealth, we are. And, what’s so bad about that? Well, maybe nothing—or maybe something. In a nutshell, here is the struggle: many people, even in our country, and most people throughout the world don’t have enough; and even the most unabashedly capitalistic among us admits that for “them” to have enough “we” probably have to have a little less. That’s a big political problem and, I would argue, an even bigger spiritual conundrum.

Stories of those who struggle with this truth are found throughout the Bible. The God of Amos, incidentally also purported to be our God, says, “Hear this, 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, surely I will never forget any of these deeds.” And Jesus, our very own Jesus of the supposedly kinder and gentler New Testament, purportedly says to his eager hearers, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you.” If I have to preach on many more of these passages, I am going to have to ask for combat pay.

The message of Amos is pretty clear and more than a little unsettling. Few of us are directly mean to the poor, hardly ever stepping on one; but even fewer of us are willing to admit that our advantage has some impact upon their disadvantage and secretly believe that if they would try harder, they’d do better. As for the gospel, I have spent most of this week trying to determine, as I have before, what this strange passage from Luke really means. Liberation theologians claim that indeed these are Jesus’ words and that he is suggesting to the underclass that any kind of action to

reverse their oppression and poverty, no matter how scandalous, is sanctioned. Others argue that Jesus, who goes about outrageously offering forgiveness without proper permission, without going through the proper channels, is being metaphorical. They suggest that Jesus likens the dishonest manager’s capacity to cut debt in half, that is forgiving half the debt, to his unauthorized offer of forgiveness to those deemed unworthy of forgiveness by the professionally religious. Who can say?

This much we know: we have two passages today, one from an eighth century prophet, some 750 years earlier than Jesus, and one from the Gospel of Luke, written in the last quarter of the first century, both of which have to do with how poor people are treated. Amos’ fury is legend; he fully believes that the God of Israel is done with the likes of these arrogant rich folks, most of whom did not consider themselves rich either. In the verses immediately following the ending of our lesson, he proclaims that as judgment for their abuse of the poor, the worship of the people of God will morph from feasts and songs of praise to laments and mourning, all wearing sackcloth in the course of a great famine during which they shall not find comfort. To say the least, his message was not well received.

Jesus, apparently not in an angry mood but pithy nonetheless, ends his confusing conversation with a verse that is perfectly clear: “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.” No confusion there, not even much room for interpretation. Of course, there are gradations and nuances and extenuating circumstances throughout our lives; but in the final analysis, it is very simple: we have to decide whether or not we are willing to give to God in a way that is commensurate with our standard of living. It is that simple. Each one of us must decide that to which he/she will primarily give his/her life. If all or most that we care about is the accumulation and hoarding or spending of wealth, our devotion to God

will take at best a distant second.

This week the government reported that in the U.S. four million more people have joined the ranks of the poverty-stricken during the last year; 44 million Americans now live below the poverty level. Translated, that means that one in seven adults and one in five children go to bed every night surrounded with the trappings of poverty, substandard housing, inadequate nutrition, poor or non-existent health care. Most of us in this room are not among those 44 million living below the poverty level—though some of us may be, and some of us are closer than others would think. Beyond a doubt, many of us are more fearful than ever in our lives that we might lose our jobs; indeed some of us already have and often with disastrous results.

It is a hard time to think about money and a particularly hard time to think about giving some of it away. The assumption would be that the more we have, the more likely we are to give generously; but it would be wrong. In fact, study after study has shown that lower-income Americans give proportionally more of their incomes to charity than do upper-income Americans—almost twice as much. What we give away reflects our view of money and the kind of power it has in our lives. That view determines how much we work, how we spend our money, what we accumulate, definitions of what really is enough and what is not. There is hardly an end to the list.

Of course, I am as conflicted about money as anyone else. The only thing I for sure know about money is that it is dangerous stuff—often very wonderful dangerous stuff that I love, but dangerous nonetheless. It is dangerous primarily because it can alter the way we see ourselves and the way we see others, and more importantly it alters the way we value others and ourselves. It is most dangerous to us when we are most afraid to give any of it away.

I can hear the groan: here it comes, a sermon about giving. Stay with me a second: it is really more about living than it is about giving. What God ordains usually is for our good. Tithing—don't get hung up on the word; we are not biblical literalists; you decide what your tithe is—got started when settled

agriculture took the place of nomadic wandering. It quickly became apparent that if there was going to be a crop next year, some of this year's harvest had to be saved for seed. If everything were eaten up this year, if everything were about taking out and nothing about putting back, the whole process would collapse. That principle applies to all of life. If we are not putting back into life at least some percentage of what we are taking out of it, we are takers, and the result will be depleted lives no matter how much we have accumulated and, then sadly, a depleted world.

Our giving of our resources and our time (like the 475 volunteers listed in today's bulletin) makes this unlikely place possible. Surrounded by some of the world's greatest temples of commerce, our witness on this grand avenue is not to indict the financial powers around us but to shout with all that we have that what they offer is not the whole story.

One day last week in the middle of the afternoon, I walked through the church. It is one my favorite things to do. It is quiet, dark, cool; and I allow myself to imagine that I smell incense, the way a church should smell. Just being here comforts me. On this particular afternoon, I observed fifteen people spread throughout this great space, all bowed in prayer. I don't know what they were praying for. Perhaps there was some superstition at work, some craziness among them, but there also was present a deep desire to connect with something deep and beyond. It was a moment of stepping aside and hoping and praying in the midst of a pretty complex world. This place is needed, now more than ever. It is needed for all kinds of people to have a place, a place to be who and how they are. We do many things here: we provide meals for those who do not have them, beds for those with no place to sleep, and groceries for those who have run out for the month. And, in addition, we offer a lifeline for the rest of us, those of us who do not look poor and afraid but on occasion, and sometimes quite often, are deeply so. It is a place worth the giving of a portion of ourselves, our time and our resources.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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