

## SERMON

**Pentecost 15 – Sunday, September 18, 2022**

**The Rev. Carolyn Bradley, Dcn**

**“Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord,**

**but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Bob Dylan, 1979**

That line from Dylan’s 1979 song, “Gotta serve somebody” kind of sums up for me the message of today’s Gospel. Today’s Gospel is a difficult text to understand. Where is Jesus going with this parable? How are we to interpret the behavior of the rich man in rewarding the manager’s dishonesty? How do we make sense of the manager’s dishonesty in betraying the trust of his employer?

In looking at this text, the story is fairly simple but is certainly not what we expect to hear from Jesus. In most parables in the Gospels, the protagonist either represents God, Christ or some other positive character. In this parable, the main characters, the rich man and the manager, are shady, and somewhat unsavory. So it is pretty clear that we should not emulate their behavior. Therefore, we must be looking for a larger, more encompassing principle here.

Perhaps the easiest way to make sense of this parable is to start with the last 2 verses and work our way back through the text. Those last 2 verses, for me, are the main theme: “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.” So, Dylan in 1979 is asking the same question that Jesus raised in the first century ...”who are you gonna serve?”

The question of balance between our spiritual and material lives is certainly not new. We find references in the Hebrew texts forbidding charging interest on loans because it was viewed as exploiting the vulnerable. Shortly, we will pray the Our Father and request that God “Forgive our us trespasses” which is sometimes termed our debts. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, there are references to debt forgiveness, economic restitution in the Magnificat, and preaching about honesty and fairness directed to tax collectors.

The balance between the acquisition of wealth and leading a meaningful spiritual life has confounded the faithful through the centuries. Barbra Rossing, a professor of NT theology, in her commentary on this Gospel, suggests that to truly grasp the complexities of this text we would need a mini-course on the economics of Roman occupied Galilee in the first century.

However, as Rossing points out, we are fairly certain in our understanding of the economics of that time and in that place “that rich landlords and rulers basically operated as loan sharks,” charging exorbitant interest rates, forcing people off their family farms and amassing more property. These practices were and still are in direct violation of biblical laws.

Jesus wants us to understand our responsibilities to God and one another by contrasting the behavior of the “sons of the world” (unbelievers) and the “sons of light” (believers). We are being encouraged to be generous with our wealth in this life so that in the life to come, we will be received into “eternal dwellings.” However, we are not to commit unrighteous acts to gain wealth. We must put this text in the context of the times in which it was written and acknowledge the Jewish laws regarding lending, hospitality, duty to care for the poor, orphans and widows, etc. The theme of this text also has implications for national and international economic situations today.

These practices of financial exploitation of people living on the margins didn't end in the first century. People today who struggle financially are still exploited through products such as high interest loans, compounding interest loans, and predatory pay-day loans. We see harsh austerity measures imposed on the international level on countries that require financial assistance from entities such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These measures mostly impact again those who are on the margins and who have no say in the negotiation of the terms and measures being imposed. According to Rossing, some faith based relief and development organizations have termed the "austerity measures" imposed by international entities as "illegitimate debt." These measures often are oppressive and have crushing effects on the futures of people least able to manage.

Excessive interest charges, as high as 25 or even 50%, in Jesus' times were often hidden by rolling the charges into the principal. The dishonest manager by reducing the payments owed to the rich man may have been forgiving the manager's cut of the interest or perhaps was adhering to the biblical laws regarding lending by forgiving all the hidden interest. The rich man, if he were a Jew (the text doesn't identify if the man is a Jew or a Gentile), may have commended the dishonest manager because now the rich man would at least appear to be observing the Torah laws.

In reading multiple commentaries on this Gospel, as it such a head scratcher to try to comprehend, there are multiple interpretations, which each open more questions. What is clear is that Jesus is warning us about the danger that wealth poses as it may become a god or an idol in itself for some people. There are increasing indications that wealth in our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture is quickly becoming the most common God that people worship.

Additionally, we are being called to be advocates for those who are being exploited by unjust economic practices. We need to be aware of financial products that are exploitative, debt structures that prevent resolution of outstanding balances through compounding interest and that lure of making wealth an idol. This parable should serve as a warning about an economic and financial system that idolizes the acquisition of massive wealth built around an unfair debt structure which causes crises for future generations regarding money and is now clearly impacting the climate of our earth.

In today's Gospel, Jesus calls us to be just, righteous managers of the many gifts God has bestowed upon us. We are reminded that everything we are and have comes from the God who loves us unconditionally. As the managers of all those gifts, we are to use our gifts to further the goals of God's reign. We are to be generous with our wealth and use it for the benefit of others. We are to practice love of neighbor in our economic relationships. This means not just being honest in our financial dealings with all but to also become more aware of policies that impact lending practices, the property tax policies regarding funding of public education in NJ which aids in creating inequality in our schools and the housing policies that are contributing to a growing housing crisis in the US and especially here at the Jersey Shore.

Jesus calls us to live in community with one another, to practice love of neighbor in all our dealings with others, and to ask why poverty and inequality continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the Gospels, we hear stories of Jesus giving hope to the people by demonstrating love, mercy and forgiveness, by trying to restore a sense of a caring community where the needs of others were recognized and addressed. Jesus came to teach a new way of being with each other by caring for others as much as we care for ourselves. That is the Good News, the joy of the Gospels. Jesus came to heal the world by demonstrating how we are to love and care for each other. It is

impossible to be a disciple of Jesus while accumulating wealth at the expense of others ,  
especially people on the margins. “You cannot serve God and wealth.” **AMEN!**