

17 Pentecost C: Luke 16:1-13, primary; Amos 8:4-7, secondary, preached September 23, 2007
@ Custer Lutheran Fellowship by Pr. Dave Van Kley

It's Only Money!

So much US currency passes through our hands each week that we actually forget the words printed on nickels and quarters, and twenty dollar bills: "In God We Trust." When you think about it, it's a strange message for a government supposedly dedicated to the separation of church and state to stamp on its money. An odd marriage of faith and capitalism!

I wonder what Jesus would say. WWJS! Consider his words: "no servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." It's almost as if Jesus is saying that the world isn't big enough for both God and money! They cannot co-exist equally, because one must always rule the other. If we worship God, we shall use everything, including our money, to serve God. If we worship money, we shall use everything, including God, to serve money. Several TV preachers have become notorious for that very thing!

Not that money **is** evil—despite the old phrase, "filthy lucre." Money has great potential to **inspire** evil. Crimes have been committed to get it. Families have been torn apart because of it. Wars have been fought over it. But money can also serve good purposes. Like the tax money that is spent on food stamps for people who really need them! Money isn't the root of all evil—the **love** of money is the root of all evil!

In truth, money is one of those things none of us can do without. Sometimes, we don't seem to have enough. We struggle to "make ends meet." We try to "stretch our dollars, pinch pennies." But think of small farmers battling to keep their farms, priced out of the market by agribusiness. Or those who can't receive any government subsidies because they don't grow one of the five approved crops. But also think of the African farmer who can't break even selling rice in his native country because subsidized imports from the US are cheaper. Or the Central American mother who used to be able to put US subsidized corn on her table before the popularity of ethanol raised the price too high.

A complicated thing, this money business! That's because it has to do with justice. It has to do with people. It has to do with God. And it has to do with you and me.

Once again, hear Jesus' startling story about two men and their money. A rich fellow had so much money he couldn't manage it. So he hired an administrator, a CFO, to take care of it. After some time, he began to hear bad reports—this man was **wasting** his money! We're not told exactly how, whether he was lining his pockets, making poor investments or just being lazy! But he was doing a lousy job! So the boss pulled him aside and said, "Enough is enough. You're fired! You have one week to turn in your records!" Well, you'd expect the manager to get down on his knees and plead for another chance. Instead, he goes to his boss' debtors and forgives part of what each one owes! "You owe 800 gallons, do you; let's change that to 400!"

“A thousand bushels in the red? Well, nobody’s looking! Let’s cut that to 800.” Watching out for old number one, he makes friends for himself with his master’s money.

The punch line is even more startling! The boss doesn’t seem upset. In fact, he **commends** the dishonest steward. “I’ve got to hand it to you!” he says. “You’re one smart cookie!”

Well, it’s not the easiest parable to interpret! But some things are clear. Money can’t be evil, if **God** gives it to us! Yet, money is not an outright gift, so much as it is a **trust** from God. **Our** money is really **God’s** money. It belongs to God. And you and I are to manage it for his glory. We are to use it in such a way that God is served.

And how is God served? The manager was praised not when he **earned** more money for the rich man, but when—in effect—he **spent** it! When he spent the money on others, even for selfish reasons, he was commended. Could it be that God is glorified and the kingdom comes not when we save more and more money, but when we use it to help others?

When Arlene and I were married 33 years ago, we didn’t know much about money. If we had some, we spent it. If we didn’t have it, we managed without it. For a long time, we lived from paycheck to paycheck, with a little assist here and there from our folks. But about two years into my first call as a pastor, an insurance rep stopped by. More than a salesman, he really seemed to care about us. He raised questions which made us think. “What are your goals?” he asked. “What do you hope to do with your money?” Well, we had never considered that. We thought goals were for people with **lots** of money. “No,” he said; “they’re even **more** important for people who **don’t** have a lot of money! What are your goals?” To send our kids through college when they got there. Because we were living in a parsonage, to purchase some land to retire on one day. To provide income for that retirement. And in the meantime, to pay our bills, put groceries on the table, and be generous in our giving. “OK,” Marty Kelto said. And then he introduced us to the world of financial planning, CD’s and money markets, IRA’S and whole life insurance.

We will always be grateful! Because of Marty, we are on our way to achieving our goals.

I think that’s being a good steward of God’s gifts. But the person today’s text holds up as an example is **not** a good steward. So it makes me a little uncomfortable. I think it’s supposed to. I think it’s supposed to make **all** of us uncomfortable.

Our daughter, Connie told us the other day that one of her “friends” had stolen \$350 from her apartment. Now you have to know a few things about Connie. She does not keep a clean house. As a waitress, she often leaves cash in piles here and there. Financially, she lives from day to day: \$350 is a **lot** of money to her! I sympathized. “I’m so sorry, Connie,” I said. “Its OK,” she said; “it’s only money.”

Later, she told us that another friend had identified the thief. But when Connie confronted

the girl, she denied taking the money. Connie said simply, “OK.” I told her, “I hope you don’t invite **her** over anymore. But if you do, make sure you hide your cash.” “I’m not going to do change my lifestyle just for her,” Connie said. Besides I don’t think she’ll steal from me a second time.” “That’s **stupid**,” I said. “You’re asking for trouble.” But Connie said, “I’ll get by. If she takes it, maybe she needs it more than me. It’s only money.”

When your kids say things like that, your hair turns grey. But maybe Connie was right. It **was** only money. Maybe that’s Jesus’ point in this parable, too: **its only money!** Don’t think too highly of your money. Don’t let it run your life.

After all, what is money good for? Jesus answered that question the way he answered every question: “it’s good for giving away.” Jesus’ **life** was good for giving away. When he went to the cross, it was as if he gathered all of our debts together and said, “What do you owe? Seventy years of selfishness? Write down zero. A thousand good deeds not done? Write down zero.”

To believe in the cross it to believe in radical freedom. It is incredibly freeing to think of life not as a possession to be held onto, but a trust to be given away. Today, we write letters to congress, on behalf of small farmers in the US, the poor in our country who need more than \$1 a meal in food stamps, and people in third world countries who just need to eat. Every letter is like a \$100 donation, they say. Still, as you write, be aware that some of the money to support the changes you advocate may come out of your **own** pocket in the form of taxes. And that’s OK. Its only money. **God’s** money.

What would happen if all of us today—maybe 250 adults if you take both services—would put \$20 in an envelope and mail it to someone we know who could use it? That would \$5000 redistributed this week right here in our community. Hey, it’s only money. **God’s** money.

In the beginning, we talked about the slogan imprinted on our money: “In God We Trust.” I don’t like that slogan much, because for one thing it’s just not true for most Americans. But even if it were, I could think of a better slogan. Not “In God We Trust,” but “A Trust from God.” Our nickels and quarters, and twenty dollar bills, our checkbooks and credit cards, stocks and bonds. All of these are a trust from God. Amen.