

September 18, 2016, 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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**Focus:** Jesus gives us true treasure.

I can still remember the knot in my stomach that Sunday. It was my freshman year in college, and I was at my new church. It was stewardship Sunday. In lieu of the usual sermon, the stewardship chair was delivering a temple talk.

As he began, I am sure I was not the only one who felt uncomfortable. The stewardship campaign was to be focused on time, talent, and treasure, but as he quickly went from 0 to 60, it became clear where the focus was, and let's just say it wasn't time or talent. He spared little time in making everyone aware of the financial needs of the church and how part of discipleship was sucking it up and increasing your tithe. As I sat there as a freshman whose income consisted of smalltime checks, student loans, and Papa John's gift-cards from my mom, and whose expenditures included tickets to ride the subway system, schoolbooks, and yes, Papa John's pizza, my heart sank, and that knot in my stomach swelled. As I opened my wallet and saw two dollar bills, I knew that I didn't have anything to offer that was going to make a difference that day. I hate talking about money in church.

So if you feel yourself getting that same knot in your stomach today, know that I'm right there with you. But there's really no way around it. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus lays it all on the line:

“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.”

What does Jesus mean? Well, we have a long parable. To be honest, I've always struggled with this story. I struggle with what it means. I struggle with what it says about Jesus. I was looking forward to diving into it this week. And after a long week of doing my homework: looking at the Greek, reading different biblical scholars, I can tell you that they don't seem to know what to do with it either.

So let's look at what we do know. We start out with one master, one middle-manager, and a whole bunch of debt slaves. The rumor mill gets going, and eventually, it turns out that the middle-manager has squandered his master's accounts: we never actually hear how. He doesn't receive what you would call a full or fair hearing. He's simply charged and sentenced. He gets the news that he's going to be fired, and then there's this long lame duck period. During the lame duck period, does the manager see the light? Does he have his “come to Jesus” moment? Does he ask for a second chance? Does he seek the master's forgiveness?

No, in fact, he carries on with the exact same type of squandering of his master's property that got him fired in the first place. He asks the debt-slaves what they owe. And let's stop there: isn't his job in keeping the accounts to know what they owe already? Why does he have to ask them? Does he know they're being honest with him? And then he takes a cut off of that,

thinking, “Well, maybe when I’ve lost my title, my position, and my respect, one of these debt slaves will take me in.”

And then he’s commended by the master. It doesn’t say that the master’s happy with what he’s done. I’m sure he’s not. The master’s lost a lot of money in this deal. But the story seems to suggest that he has some grudging sort of respect. Perhaps the master is thinking to himself of another situation and saying, “I wish I had thought of that back then.”

A lot of ink has been spilled on this passage. Who’s the manager? Jesus, since he “forgives” others’ debts? Seems unlikely. First of all, what he’s forgiving isn’t his own. And we know that when Jesus forgives, it’s not just a discount; he forgives all our sins. Second, the manager’s only doing it to curry favor with people he hopes will take him in afterward, but Jesus forgives us because of who he is. And third, Jesus refers to the character the entire time as the “dishonest manager,” who handles “dishonest wealth.” Not a ringing endorsement. And if the master is God, as some suppose, why is God condoning what Jesus calls dishonesty?

I think the next line is the key. “The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light.” Jesus isn’t telling a parable about God’s work. He’s not telling a story about God’s values. He’s telling a story about the way the world works and what the world values.

...which brings us back to money. In this passage, money is the issue, isn’t it? Money is what leads the manager to lose his livelihood, his title, and his respect. Money is what leads the master to throw his manager out in the cold without a fair hearing. And the debt slaves? Money is the entire reason that they’re forced to try to eke out a living serving someone else in the first place. Throughout the parable, Jesus talks about the destructive power of money. He talks about money as something that is a real threat to the relationships of the human family. He talks about money as something that demands our allegiance, a master whom we serve.

We know that too well, don’t we? How many arguments have we had in our own families over issues of money? I can say that in my own family, Nikki and I have very different perspectives on money. You might be surprised to hear that she is generally the more liberal one, and I often find myself more like the master wanting to make sure that we’re not squandering. In one recent example, she needed new glasses, a pretty basic necessity, and I still dug in my heels asking if we couldn’t find a better deal. When I did that, who was I serving? Was I serving my marriage vows? Was I serving God? Or was I serving Master Money?

Perhaps there is no more dangerous place to talk about money than in a church. And yes, I’m getting that knot in my stomach again. It’s not just that Stewardship Sunday in my freshman year of college. In congregations all over, there is nothing that challenges the mastership of Jesus Christ in congregational life more than money. We have seen it time and again. In council, in congregational meetings, we can make the biggest decisions about reaching out to our neighbors through events like Germanfest or the Yard Sale, we can plan complex operations involving thousands of cookies like God’s Work, Our Hands, we can plan Bible studies and confirmation curriculums, we can even tackle problems like racism and the KKK’s appearance.

But nothing stirs the pot, nothing threatens our church family as much as when Master Money talks.

The truth is that we sometimes do have to have these conversations in church. Conversations about money are good ones to have, and when we're honest and upfront about them, we make better decisions. We need to be able to pay our own bills. And more than that, Christ's church has a mission. If there is no mission, there is no church. Those things do cost money. And while it's tempting to listen to the knots in our stomachs, the fact that Jesus talks about money so much indicates that he thought it was pretty important, too. So we can't simply avoid it.

But we can't let money master us. We can't let money divide and conquer us. We can't let money be our true treasure.

If someone asked you to tell them about Resurrection Lutheran Church, what would you tell them? Would the first thing you quoted be the budget: the tithes vs. expenditures? I hope not. I myself might talk about how we live out our mission statement: Welcoming People in Christ: Caring, Sharing, Serving. I might talk about our weekly worship where we receive Christ's body and blood, where we are blessed with amazing musicians. I might talk about our partnerships in the community with other churches. I might talk about our sometimes silly-looking yellow t-shirts and hands-on community service. I might talk about our youth group. I might talk about our food pantry. Or I might talk about homemakers. Or Pub Faith. Or Holy Whine Night. Or our cards group. I might talk about how if someone finds out you're in the hospital, they're there to visit like white-on-rice. I might talk about how at this place, we gather as a family week-in, and week-out. I might talk about how in the best of times and even in the hardest of times, we have conversations with each other. We love each other. And as a family, we work through things together.

When I talk about this church and our mission, I don't get that knot in my stomach. I am excited to talk about this church, about the ministry all of you are doing. Sometimes that includes money, but just as often it includes taking time to show up for food pantry or altar guild or sharing your talents for kniffle-making or playing saxophone in worship.

For me, that's true treasure. And it's all possible because of the work of Jesus Christ. It's possible because he died for every one of us here. He died so that we could serve him and one another. He died to defeat those things that master us: the things that threaten to divide us, and when he was on the cross, he crucified all those masters with him. He buried those masters, even Master Money in the tomb, so that we might rise no longer as slaves, but as children of the light.

Living as children of the light is sometimes difficult. Sometimes it means having tough conversations. But it also means that when it is all said and done, we are all of us welcomed into the same eternal home by the same heavenly Father who blesses us abundantly with the true riches of life together. Amen.