

“God or Wealth – What Will It Be?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
September 22, 2019

Luke 16: 1-13

Two weeks ago, we held our monthly Faith Conversations after the 11:00am worship service. That Sunday, I had preached on a passage from earlier in Luke’s Gospel, in chapter 14. In that passage, Jesus says that all who wish to be his disciple must carry his cross, give up all their possessions, and follow him. I asked the group that day what their initial impressions were of the message that morning. Amy Winton – I can say this because she’s not here today – Amy said, “Now I feel guilty for purchasing a new iPad last month!”

That afternoon, we had a pretty lively discussion about our belongings and possessions. We all have tendencies to collect different things – we have hobbies and interests that lead to collecting stuff. Some of us have those collections under control, while others of us may be self-described hoarders – or that’s what others would say about us! Many times, what we collect or possess has emotional meaning or attachment to us. If we love to sew or quilt or do arts and crafts, we will have fabric, material, paper, and other supplies to enjoy that activity. If we love to work on cars or mechanical things, we will have parts, a chassis, and the tools needed to enjoy that activity. A lot of times, we enjoy those activities because they were taught to us by a family member or friend – an aunt who taught us how to knit, a father who taught us how to fix things, a friend who introduced us to a sport or hobby. So, when we look at or use those possessions, there is an emotional attachment which is undeniable. And can also make it even harder to let go of them.

I’ve thought about this a lot recently as our church has experienced the death of five members in the last two months. When a loved one dies, it is the living who must make decisions about all the stuff that is left behind. As the saying goes, “Have you ever seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer?”

Many of you have experienced this in your lives, and our family has certainly lived through this over the last two years. Looking through clothes, collections, tools, professional items, photo albums, books – making decisions about who wants what, who makes those decisions, and what to do with the items no one claims. For some folks, it’s best to do it a little bit at a time – taking small bites, rather than one huge chomp. For other folks, it’s best to remove the belongings as quickly as possible – like ripping off a band aid – so that the emotions and memories do not become overwhelming. Everyone has to face this in the best manner for themselves.

I still remember how my great aunt, Adeline Ostwalt, handled this situation, and I think it is the best I’ve experienced. Before she moved out of her home to a retirement facility, she made a list of all her belongings. Since

she had no children, she sent that list to all her living siblings and her nieces and nephews. They were each asked to put their name beside the items on the list that they would like to have. If multiple people put their names beside an item, then Adeline would make the decision about who got that item. Then they were responsible for coming and getting the items before Adeline had to move. It was a brilliant way to make all of those decisions – before Adeline was incapacitated or died – and for her to be a part of the decision-making process. She lived another fourteen years in her apartment at the retirement home, and she knew that her belongings and possessions were with the people who truly wanted and treasured them.

As human beings, we love our stuff. We come to believe that what we own defines our identity. We look for security in the income we earn. If that doesn't seem to be enough in our minds, we look for ways to garner more wealth. We might feel like that's even more the case in our modern world. But the truth is it's always been that way, even back when Jesus walked the roads of Galilee. The proof of that is he speaks about money more than any other topic in his earthly ministry.

And the way he talked about wealth and possessions often made people uncomfortable. As Lynn Japinga says: *Jesus was not a big fan of financial planning, at least not as we know it today. He advised a potential disciple to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor (Luke 18:18-30). He told would-be disciples not to worry about their lives, the future, or what they will eat or drink or wear (12:22-31). He chastised the rich fool for building bigger barns to store his belongings (12:13-21). Perhaps this lack of material concern for the future was viable in a family-oriented culture where children cared for their elderly parents. However, in the twenty-first century, when many parents support their adult children and face the possibility of living thirty years beyond retirement, Jesus' advice seems unrealistic. We are anxious about the stock market, anxious about retirement funds, and anxious about being anxious. We also realize that while some people worry about their nest eggs for the future, many other people cannot feed and house their families in the present.*

In part because of these instructions from Jesus, Christians have had an uneasy relationship with money. Monks and nuns took vows of poverty because they thought money was seductive, dangerous, and best avoided . . . At the other extreme, some Christians have attained millionaire or even billionaire status, sometimes through morally ambiguous means. Wealthy people may see their success as divine blessing on their virtue and effort (Deuteronomy 8:12-16); they may be uncomfortable with excess wealth and give some of it away.

Most Christians live somewhere in between these extremes of poverty and wealth. They are caught in the midst of multiple realities: they need money to survive, they may have more than their fair share, and they know many other people who do not have enough. It would be helpful to have

some clear guidance from Scripture as to exactly how much money followers of Jesus can keep for themselves and how much they should give away.

The text about the shrewd steward provided no such clarity (Lynn Japinga, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2019: 334-335).

In this passage from Luke 16, we are faced with not just a story about money and wealth and following God, but in truth, a very ambiguous and challenging story to get a clear sense of meaning and direction from. At least in Luke 14, Jesus states pretty clearly that we shouldn't be so tied to our possessions that we aren't willing to give them up to be his disciple. In this passage, it's very hard to determine just what exactly Jesus is wanting his followers to do. Julian DeShazier describes it in this way:

It is, on the surface, a wildly ambiguous text for a lot of reasons. There's the parable itself, in which an already dishonest manager performs new acts of questionable moral substance – and then the boss he just cheated responds by praising him. This is the moment when you expect Jesus to say, “Don't do that.” (Because all parables are either “do this” or “don't do this,” right?) But Jesus' commentary is instead basically, Look how much smarter this guy is than you all.

And then his ethical exhortation is . . . to use dishonest wealth? To make friends with dishonest people? To become like the dishonest manager? After which he seems to quote some older sayings, one of which says to be faithful with dishonest wealth.

What's going on here?

These parables about money are tricky . . . What I think he's doing is talking to two different audiences. In the parable, he is talking to the disciples. But he is also surrounded by others, whom Luke refers to as tax collectors, sinners, and Pharisees. This is part of a sermon series of sorts about money, doing right with it, and getting a second chance to do right when you haven't. Imagine hearing this right after the prodigal son parable, and it makes a lot more sense. Jesus talks to the crowd, pauses, talks to his disciples, and in verse 9 talks to the crowd again.

“Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth,” he says. In other words, If you've been dishonest thus far, use what you've gained to do some good. He's not telling disciples to be dishonest; this is a sermon for the dishonest already among them. The dishonest manager isn't praised because he becomes dishonest; he is praised because he finally figures out how to do some good for his boss. It is his decision to change that is of note here – the same as it was in the prodigal son parable just before (*The Christian Century*, September 11, 2019: 18).

Whether one has been honest for a lifetime, or honest for a short while, Jesus' concluding statement is for everyone: “No one 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” (16:13). It's God or it's wealth – what will it be?

Last month, we had our annual church officers meeting. At that meeting, I shared with the elders, deacons, and trustees a statistical profile of John Knox over the last six years. (show first slide) As you will see from this graph, we are not a church that is growing in membership; we have experienced a gradual decline in both membership and worship attendance since 2013. This is not unlike many other Presbyterian congregations in our city, state, and country. Our average Sunday attendance over this period was about 58% of our active membership each year. (show second slide) And as you will see from this slide, we are a church whose members are predominantly older – very active, but nevertheless older. That, too, is fairly indicative of congregations our size in mainline churches in our country.

(show third slide) But I believe one of the areas that makes John Knox unique is in its generosity and commitment – both financially and in time given to its ministries. Over this same six-year period, our giving per member has gone up each year. The blue bars represent giving to the annual budget; the orange bars represent giving to capital campaigns and debt retirement. Not once since 2009, when we began paying the loan for this sanctuary, have we had to postpone a mortgage payment; instead, each year, we have made additional payments on the principal of the loan. Our mission giving has never decreased; instead it has increased and always been at least a tithe (10%) of our annual budget. I'm not saying we are perfect by any means. But I am saying that you as a congregation continue to exhibit what it means to be a community of believers who have chosen to serve God – not wealth – and give freely and joyfully to support Christ's mission and ministry in this place.

And it's not only in terms of your money. Bev Ray, one of your elders, had an excellent question the day of the officers' meeting which I would like your help in answering. She asked, "I wonder how many hours a week or a month the people of John Knox give in service to the church?" How much time do you spend for worship, study, and service for this Open. Caring. Community? When you receive your stewardship materials at the beginning of October, we will have a way for you to share that information with us. And when we have that compiled, I will look forward to sharing that data with you, for I believe that is another way we as a congregation seek to serve God first with all that we have been given – our time, our talent, and our treasure.

God or wealth – what will it be? May we see anew how the treasures we possess do not possess us, but provide us the means through which the kingdom of God might be made manifest in our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.