

Pentecost-17-c2007

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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 23, 2007

1 Timothy 2.1-7
Luke 16.1-13

Mammon

“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.” –Luke 16.13

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

This is one of those passages that brings the preacher to his or her knees. It isn't even stewardship time quite yet, and here comes this hard-hitting and, frankly, perplexing bit of teaching about money and wealth. Those of us who receive W-2's from the church are especially compromised here. On the one hand, Jesus is hard hitting and pretty darn hard on the wealthy. On the other hand, one doesn't want to bit the

hand that feeds him! (I think this is what is called, in other lines of work, a full disclosure of conflicts of interest. Maybe we'll have to start adding some fine print to the bulletin?)

It is also a hard passage because of this confusing parable about the “dishonest steward”—the man who cheats his boss in order to curry favor with people who might help him in his impending period of unemployment. The story presents considerable ethical issues which I'm not going to address today. In the end, it seems to suggest that disciples of Jesus need to be shrewd and planful in the service of the kingdom of God. Christians don't have to be simpletons or doormats.

That we have a hard teaching on possessions and money shouldn't come as a surprise. This is the Gospel of Luke, after all. All of the gospels pay attention to this dimension of Jesus' teaching, but Luke emphasizes it repeatedly and with every wrench and hammer in the writer's toolbox. In his gospel and in Acts, the message is consistent and tough:

Woes are pronounced on the rich and yet the rich are saved. (19.10) Missionaries on their itineraries are to take no provisions, and yet those who have the means to

give food and lodging to them are blessed. Beatitudes are spoken to the poor, and yet possessions can be used for the good. (8.1-3; 10.29-37; 12.32-34) In the early church, those who had shared voluntarily with those who did not, and the ministry of Paul included receiving and delivering offerings for the famine-stricken poor in Judea (Acts 2.44-45; 4.32-35; 11.27-30)¹

Luke presents no blanket condemnation to wealth, and yet it is clearly something that requires strong and critical scrutiny. The passage ends with an abrupt saying that sticks in memory and helps us never to forget the tensions inherent in Christian ownership of possessions:

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. –Luke 16.13

This is the verse that I've chosen for our focus today. I was seeking sympathy at the dinner table one night this week and said, "This is going to be a hard sermon to write." With all of the confidence that accrues to a high school senior, my daughter, Beth, said, "Maybe I can write it for you. What is your topic?"

"That you can't serve both God and wealth," I answered.

“No problem,” she said, “It doesn’t say ‘at the same time,’ so you can alternate!”

The more I’ve thought about it, the more I’m convinced that Beth’s strategy, while perhaps not the final word, does frame the question rather nicely. We know that Christians are invariably going to be involved (sometimes deeply so) in the world of working and accumulating some wealth. We also know that we want to serve God. Monday to Friday at the office. Sunday morning in church. Two different foci or “masters,” if you will. *Can we alternate?* That is really the question. Does our attention to wealth need to interfere with our devotion to God? Or, the other way around: Does our devotion to God stop us from paying attention to wealth?

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When I decided to focus on this single verse, I chose my sermon title, “Mammon.” After announcing this at a worship planning meeting, a certain younger staff member (cough, cough) said, “What the heck is

that?” At first I thought that maybe this was indicative of a curricular difference between Yale Divinity School and the Pacific School of Religion. But then I realized it was more likely a simple generational difference between someone who grew up reading and hearing the Revised Standard Version of the Bible verses someone who grew up with the New Revised Standard Version.

“You cannot serve God and mammon.” That’s what I grew up hearing, and I suspect I’m not alone in that. And somehow, for me, it seems to capture something more. In my memory, mammon was written with an uppercase “M”—as in a proper name. In fact, I had a vague memory that Mammon was a Canaanite god or something along those lines—a god of material wealth. I made a note to do some research. (And to share it with Curt.)

Somewhat to my surprise (and disappointment, since I was hanging my whole sermon on this hook), there was no ancient god—Canaanite or otherwise—named Mammon. It is simply a transliteration of Semitic word meaning “wealth, riches, property.” But instead of translating it into Greek, Luke just kept it in the original language. It

must have been a familiar word to his readers. (Much like we might use a French phrase like *faux pas*.) The RSV translation decided to preserve this approach in the English translation. The NRSV decided just to translate the Semitic word into English along with the Greek.

The problem with the NRSV's approach is that the word mammon had taken on additional meaning in subsequent tradition. Though there was no ancient god with this name, my vague memory of an uppercase Mammon was not entirely incorrect. Mammon came to be personified as the name of a demon of covetousness. An encounter with Mammon is the first great temptation described in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* where Mammon proclaims himself as "the greatest god below the sky." Mammon later appears as a fallen angel in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and as a symbol of commercial, materialist society in the twentieth century writings of Upton Sinclair—and in many places in between.²

Whatever word we use, the point is fairly simple and known to us all: wealth and its accumulation and spending takes on a life of its own. Material possessions can *consume* us—our time, our energy, our passion, our devotion. This is not just a problem for the very rich. It is

a problem for all of us. Mammon, like any god, demands to be worshipped at some altar. Whether that altar is a hedge fund, or a marina, or Costco, or the Family Dollar store makes little difference.

The temptation to worship Mammon is especially strong for those of us in a rich part of the world. (You're not rich, you say? Do you have running water? Do you have a car? If so, you're rich by world standards.) We live in a land of opportunity and one of those opportunities, unfortunately, is the temptation to idolatry. It has been said that Americans "worship their work, work at their play, and play at their religion"—and there's an element of truth to that. Mammon has many potential altars in an affluent society.

We come here to church, every Sunday, to worship God. We know that God is glorified in our worship and that we are uplifted in the process. What we sometimes forget is that our worship of the One, True God helps to immunize us against the temptation to worship false gods. Jesus and Luke teach us that we can't serve two masters because "alternating" just doesn't work. Your true heart can only be in one place. The Christian faith presents us with a way of *ordering* our

loyalties. If God comes first, if Jesus is served, then our other loyalties will fall into place.

There is no way for a sermon like this to provide easy answers about the role of wealth and possessions in Christian lives. The life of faith is inherently a struggle—a tension—with different impulses and priorities tugging for our attention. Each person here has to engage that struggle for him or herself. I can't say, "Relax, don't worry about it. Jesus wants you to have nice things and be happy." He may, but he also wants your heart and if your nice things get in the way, I'd be doing you a great disservice to ease the tension caused by his hard words. Neither can I say, "Just tithe 10% of your income and you'll be fine." I wish this formula worked, since I believe in it and I practice it. But Jesus isn't—ultimately—about formulas and rules. He may want 10% or maybe it will be 20%. Quite often he talked more in terms of 100%. You and Jesus need to talk about that yourselves. And so do I.

"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." –Luke 16.13

These are tough words. But they are also bracing words, clarifying words. No simple answers obtain. There's no hedging. No explaining away. No alternating.

The choice is tough. But it is also clear. Deep down, we know which master we want to serve...and his name ain't Mammon.

Let us pray. Help us Lord, to choose you. In every day, in every moment, in every part of our life. Amen.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke-Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), page 189.

² D.L. Jeffrey, "Mammon" in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), page 475.