

Lutheran Church of the Good shepherd
Pentecost 15
September 22, 2019

We Belong to God **Luke 16:1-13**

One problem with the passage from Luke's gospel that we read today is that it contains too many lessons for one sermon — well, unless you are up for a three-hour sermon today. But we know how a vote on that would turn out.

One possible sermon to be drawn from this passage would be about how worldly people tend to be wiser in the devious ways of the world than spiritually attuned people. But let's save that for a week when you want to feel holier than people who are using their smarts for their own personal financial advantage.

Another possible sermon would be about the verse that suggests wealth can be used to make friends, though what's really of value is not the wealth itself but the depth of caring friendship. With that lesson we'd have to wrestle with the troubling idea that money can buy love and getting through that thicket could take us hours.

A third possible sermon could focus on the idea that if you can be trusted with small things, you're more likely to be trustworthy with larger things, including responsibility and money.

That seems like an easily understood notion, but to dig into that lesson thoroughly, we'd have to spend time thinking aloud about how power can corrupt even the nicest, most respectable people, and it might take us until next week to come up with some helpful theories about why that is and whether there's any way to prevent it. History, by the way, doesn't give us much cause for optimism about the corruptibility of people.

So instead of one of those sermons today, let's look at the fourth lesson embedded in this Luke text. Jesus puts that lesson this way: "You cannot serve God and wealth." Or as the old King James Version has it, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

That odd word "mammon" comes from the Aramaic word *mamona*, which simply means "riches." Aramaic, as you may know, was the language Jesus spoke. You don't find much of it in the early Bible manuscripts, which are written in Hebrew and Greek, though part of the book of Daniel in the Hebrew scriptures is written in Aramaic, and there are a few Aramaic words in the New Testament, including the phrase Jesus cries out from the cross: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachtani?" — which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

That is an astonishingly painful question, but it's one that relates directly to the lesson about our inability to serve both God and wealth. So, let's explore that a bit.

Some of the confessions of faith used by various denominations emphasize that we are God's and not our own. For instance, the "Brief Statement of Faith," adopted by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1983, starts this way: "In life and in death we belong to God."

No one understood that reality more deeply or more personally than Jesus, whom the church declares to be both fully human and fully divine. Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate, God enfleshed to rescue and redeem humanity: to guide people, as he said, to live more abundantly. So, Jesus knew in his heart of hearts what he wants us to know, which is that we are God's.

That's what makes his cry from the cross so traumatizing, so stark. In his human nature, Jesus came to understand the feeling of being so alone that it was as if God had walked away, disowned him.

It's a feeling that could come to Jesus — and can come to us — only when we deeply grasp the reality that in life and in death we belong to God and cannot serve both God and something or someone else. If we have no sense of that, if we disbelieve that, if we reject that truth, we can't fully feel anger, outrage or sadness when we experience God's absence. And yet it's precisely at such times — and maybe mostly at such times — that hope is even possible.

The great French Reformed theologian Jacques Ellul put it this way in his book *Hope in Time of Abandonment*: “Hope comes alive only in the dreary silence of God, in our loneliness before a closed heaven, in our abandonment. ... Man is going to express his hope that God’s silence is neither basic nor final, nor a cancellation of what we had laid hold of as a Word from God.”

This sense of abandonment that each of us has felt at some time or another is itself a sign of the hope about which Ellul writes because we cannot feel abandoned by someone with whom we don’t have a loving relationship. We cannot feel betrayed by someone who doesn’t love us. Betrayal and abandonment presume love. In fact, it feels as if love itself has been betrayed and abandoned.

So, when we’re angry at God, it’s a sign that we understand the fourth lesson in the Luke passage today, the lesson that we cannot serve both God and something or someone else. If we choose to serve God — because God first chose to love us — then we have no other master. As the great Scottish pastor William Barclay writes, “We either belong to God totally and altogether, or not at all.” This idea of belonging to God — this vertical relationship — is different from any horizontal relationships we have with other humans.

For another thing, parents know that at some point, if matters work out right, their children will become independent. In fact, that's the goal. They aren't our puppets. We don't own them in any eternal sense, as God owns us. If we try to control our kids, it comes to grief. We can love them, of course, but love precludes control. Human love sets people free. It doesn't bind them to a will not their own. So human parenthood doesn't give us a perfect model for what it means that we belong to God.

In fact, the best — and maybe only — model for understanding that relationship is to look to Jesus. We are not and cannot be God incarnate. But we can look at the way Jesus always and everywhere sought to join his will with the will of the one he called Abba, Father.

One place to see this most clearly is near the end of Jesus' life, when he's with his disciples in Gethsemane and he leaves them to pray alone. As Matthew tells the story, Jesus "threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'"

Can you and I get into the habit of saying just that in every situation that confronts us? "Yet not what I want, God, but what you want." And is it so difficult to figure out what God wants? Well, yes, if we try to ask God to help us decide whether to paint our living room dune cream off-white or eggshell off-white. But in the things that really matter in life, we already know what God wants.

God wants us to love one another, to show mercy and compassion to the needy, to be generous because God has been generous to us, to show gratitude, to care about justice. God wants our hearts to break over whatever breaks God's own heart. And God wants us to tell others about the joy we've found through Christ, the joy of knowing that in life and in death we belong to God and serve only God.

Perhaps you know the old hymn that starts out this way: "O Love that will not let me go; I rest my weary soul in thee." It's God's love that will not let us go. If we love anything or anyone more than we love God, we are trying to serve two masters. It won't work, friends. It will come to grief. So, at every turn let's say, "Yet not what I want, God, but what you want." May it be so.