

Sermon: Stewardship Sunday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

October 23, 2016

Year C

Sirach 35:12-17

Psalm 84:1-6

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

Luke 18:9-14

God... I thank you that I am not like other people... especially this tax collector... can you just hear the arrogance... I fast twice a week... and give a tenth of all my income... but the tax collector... standing far off... who would not even look up to heaven... was more concerned about being a sinner... and he beat his breast and asked for God's forgiveness... and Jesus said that the tax collector went home more justified... more righteous...

And so we have this interesting little contrast... the Pharisee... the one who would be expected to follow all the rules... is made suspect... and the tax collector... who was likely a collaborator... who would be expected to be maligned... is lifted up as justified... the Pharisee... the one who was self-righteous... and the tax collector... who may not have tithed... but knew his shortcomings... and who was open to God's examination and healing... and God's Wisdom...

The book of Sirach was written by Ben Sira... the son of Sira... it's a Wisdom book... and although it made it into the Revised Common Lectionary... it didn't make it into the Bible's canon... it's in the Apocrypha... which means *hidden writings*... and it helps us remember that although money does not make the world go around... as is claimed in the song from the musical Cabaret... it is the means by which we express our faithfulness and gratitude for God's generous grace... we bring gifts to God not as charitable owners... or sly negotiators... but as humble stewards... and stewardship is not about courting God's favor... but responding to it with gladness...

We said a few weeks ago... that money isn't the root of all evil... but the love of money is... the attachment to money is... making it into an idol is... it's like saying... *Oh... we*

can never use the fine china... we have to save it for... well... we don't know... but we have to save it... what good is having it if it's not used... not shared... not allowed to do that for which it was created...

That's because money is like unrealized pure potential... sitting around... it does nothing... but as a tool... it can be used for good or for ill... and while it's true that God's love and grace are absolute gifts... unconditional and free... the ministry required to proclaim that love can be costly... as it is when we buy food for the hungry... clothing for the naked... medical care for the the sick... or re-surface the parking lot...

The cover image on today's bulletin is my New Year's Day pledge payment envelope... yes... there'll be a service... and when we use our money closer to home... we can use it to proclaim the Gospel... which we do when we pay the expenses to operate and maintain a church building... or offer up the alms... because that's what they are... to pay my stipend... because yes... I am here... as the direct result... of your free will offerings...

But there are other expectations... alluded to in v.13 of Sirach... which Pharisees might like... and which were lived out in the life of Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter II... Fred began his career as a teenage preacher and became an assistant pastor... but his popularity became much more widespread in the mid-1970s... when he became known as Rev. Ike... when his ministry reached its peak... when his weekly radio sermons were carried by hundreds of stations across the United States... he was famous for his "Blessing Plan"... listeners... including me when I was in college and eating ramen noodles... sent him money... and in return he blessed them... he said doing this would make his listeners more prosperous... if they had the right attitude... but he was criticized for his noticeable interest not just in blessing money... but in making it...

We can use money to educate about and promote the scriptural values of unity and forgiveness... the stewardship of the earth... the importance of renewable energy sources... about the diversity of God's creation...

But when this nation... when the world... uses its resources to promote division... or greed... or values which are in opposition to those things about which Jesus spoke... or when it fails to use its resources... and yes... maybe specifically its money... to address and resolve the issues we all face... we are all judged through the consequences of what we do... or those things that we fail to do...

So according to v. 13 in Sirach... the Pharisee approaches his tithe with the expectation of making a 700% return on his investment... the tax collector... has a different attitude...

Bishop Craig Satterlee wrote... the tax collector knows that he does not... that he cannot... give to the Most High as the Most High has given to him... the tax collector knows that the last thing he deserves from God is a reward... he gives as best he can from a truly grateful heart... beating his breast... the tax collector expects nothing in return... but implores God to be merciful to him... perhaps because this tax collector has no expectations... he is overwhelmed by the grace... peace... forgiveness... and love that he receives from the God... for the tax collector... Sirach's words might not sound as much like a divine contract... as the advice of a fellow pilgrim who knows his need of mercy... who gave what he could... and was overwhelmed by God's goodness... and Jesus called "righteous"... the one who trusted in God rather than in himself...

I think it takes time... and some really hard work... to learn to trust more and more in a God who is both imminent and transcendent... but who sometimes seems far less imminent... and far more transcendent... and it takes some insight to bring the transcendent out into the open...

Two years ago... I preached about the question the Pharisees put to Jesus in Matthew 22... Was it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not... and drawing from the Wisdom in Psalm 24:1... which says: *The earth is the Lord's... and the fullness thereof...* Jesus could easily respond: This is Caesar's coin... give it back to him... because when all is said and done... the whole earth... and everything in and on it... including the vineyard... belongs to God... not to the collaborators... not to Rome... not even to anyone today... so for Jesus and many of his contemporaries... the answer to his question... is that nothing belongs to Caesar... everything belongs to God... even the money in our savings and checking accounts...

When we sit with this realization... that everything belongs to God... we are formed by it... and hopefully... our sense of ownership diminishes... and our sense of stewardship increases... though we can also reject domination system thinking which expects the widow... or any poor person to give the last of what they have... though we could understand how their interior attitude of thankfulness... might motivate that behavior...

I told my spiritual director on Friday... that I believe a phase transition is coming... people on both sides of the political divide have realized that the way things are... isn't working... there are just a handful of people with wealth almost beyond measure... and far too many widows... and families... with not nearly enough mites... to live lives of dignity... too many politicians who are fearful of passing laws that protect the least and the last... and being the stewards of the environment the way God intended... and the truth is... we have the resources to do it all... we just don't yet have the collective will...

Yes... the world is on a cusp... do we promote false and antiquated notions of scarcity thinking... or do we finally get... can we finally get as a nation and as a planet... that everything belongs to God... and learn to use money as the kind of tool for good that it can be...

As Holy Cross and Ascension prepare our budgets for next year... there will be a stewardship letter going out in a few weeks... so I ask us... to ask ourselves... do we embrace the politics of giving... do we give with a sense of contract... instead of one of covenant... do we give to the church only when we like what God gives to us... do we give because we like the Prayers of the People... or the Eucharistic prayer... or the sermon... or the music... or the color of the carpet... or the flowers... or the ministries in which we engage... or do we give to the church the way the tax collector gave... expecting nothing in return for the vast riches which God has already given... and continues to give to us... I ask us to ask ourselves... why do we give to the church...

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