

Thomas R. Cook  
Sermon #459 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, Pennsylvania  
11:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist  
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 23, 2007

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“Do Good with What You’ve Got”

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Scripture: Luke 16:1-13; 16 Pentecost C (Proper 20)

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Okay, we have it straight from the horse’s mouth this morning: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Jesus cannot be any clearer. So, with such a definitive standard, it shouldn’t be too hard then to determine just how we are doing. Let’s consider, then, our:

- Percentage of personal funds going to religious and charitable purposes;
- Percentage of daily work effort devoted directly and indirectly to the service of God;
- Daily time expenditure devoted to prayer and study of Scripture;
- Number of Sundays gathered with the Church community;
- Percentage of time given to teaching my children the love of God and importance of faith;
- Percentage of time given to the promotion of social justice, service to the poor, and the love of neighbor.

Okay, let’s do the numbers to determine where the bulk of our efforts are going, and see just who or what it is we are serving. **[PAUSE]**

I don’t know about you, but that sort of analysis really worries me. Why? Because I have the sinking feeling I would always come up short. In fact, I think most everything about our contemporary way of life tends to push our ratios far from the side of the service of God in favor of the service of something else. And the way Jesus calls it, it looks like that something else is wealth.

If we were to really settle down for a minute and take a look at where our principle expenditures of time, money, and effort go, upon which side would we fall? God or wealth? Most people nowadays make a far greater effort to get to work than to church. We can easily tie up any disposable cash we have in luxuries, debt, and the hundreds of demands of modern life, from childcare to medications. Time once devoted to worship and service of God and neighbor is eaten up by work, recreation, and sometimes, the legitimate need for good old REST. Yet with all that we do to make productive use of our time, some studies suggest that, as a society, we work more now than we used to work, but for less money. And membership and participation in faith communities has plummeted in many denominations of the church. Whatever it was that we thought we had to offer to God, we must feel we don’t have to offer anymore, or maybe we have decided we can’t or we won’t. But we could...

Remember, Jesus didn’t say you cannot have God and wealth; he said you cannot serve both God and wealth. And though some of us may consider ourselves people who don’t really

have a great deal of wealth in the first place, that doesn't mean we don't serve its interests. We buy and we sell and we trade what we have, and some get fabulously rich by our participation in this economic dance, and some grow remarkably poor. And what can we do, we who would try to serve God but who also must live in a world that puts such emphasis upon wealth?

Jesus tells the story of a servant, a manager who has everything he needs from his master to make a good living for the master and for himself. And yet, somewhere along the line, things go awry, and the manager acts dishonestly, and his world comes crashing down. We don't know what he did wrong, but whatever he did, he gets caught.

Yet what happens next is amazing. Thinking quickly on his feet, the manager turns to his master's debtors, forgives a portion of their debts, and creates a network of appreciative people, people he can count on to help him in the future. Brilliant!

I really don't believe that Jesus is commending dishonesty as a means of earning wealth or divine favor. My guess is that not all of us, really not any of us, has always been entirely honest in everything we've ever done. Not everything we have now is entirely good. See, the trouble with money is that it can be used for bad purposes as well as good purposes, and each dollar that passes through our hands has likely, at one time or another, been used for both. Money isn't always "honest wealth" even though we may have come by it honestly.

But all that we have, honest and dishonest wealth, we can decide to put to good use. We can be shrewd like that servant Jesus tells about who was caught in some dishonesty, so he shared wealth, ill-gotten though it may have been, and by using wealth for good, that servant made friends, he made others appreciative of what he had done for them, and he made the master look generous in the eyes of his debtors. And the master, though he could not commend the dishonesty, at least had to give that servant credit for being smart.

So, are we being smart? What are we doing with what we have? We can make sure that it does good not only for ourselves, but for others too. And in that way, we won't just serve wealth and try to serve God too, which Jesus says is impossible anyway. We can actually serve God with wealth, by using it to fulfill God's good purposes. And maybe for that, at least we can be commended for being smart. We might even hope that we can be forgiven.

So, if we do our analysis ---service to God or to wealth--- do we come up short on the God side? Fortunately, God doesn't judge on straight ratios. We can take what we have and share of it for good use for God's purposes. That, at least, seems shrewd. Even wise.