

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, 19 September 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Daniel Clendenin in this week's *Journey with Jesus* describes today's parable as "one of the craziest stories in the entire Bible". It does bear close examination and thought, because it is possible to take away quite the wrong message. Jesus begins, "There was a rich man ..." There is our first clue to how to understand what is to come. It does not say "The Kingdom of God is like ..." or any such thing which would indicate that we are to model our lives and expectations on what follows. The rich man is neither an image of nor a spokesperson for God.

The rich man discovers that his manager is squandering his property – the opposite of his job responsibility. So the rich man calls his manager on the carpet and tells him to close out the books because he is fired. The manager realizes that he is about to be thrown out with no way to earn his living (who will hire a manager fired for mismanagement?) So he considers how to feather his nest. He still has control over the books, so he discounts several loans with debtors whose gratitude he earns, hoping that they will reciprocate with hospitality in the lean days ahead. They are surprised and grateful, even though they know that this is dishonest and cheating the rich man, their legitimate creditor.

The rich man is not fooled. In fact, there is no indication that the bad manager made any attempt to hide his stratagem. In the most memorable line of the parable, the rich man "commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly". He does not want to keep such a person on his payroll, but he shares the man's values. Above all, they both value money, personal gain, personal security. So the rich man appreciates his dishonest employee's motivation and success.

Jesus goes on to comment that worldly people, ungodly people are much shrewder than godly people. It almost sounds as though he is saying we should be more like them, especially in the puzzling line, "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

So are we being advised to cheat our employers, to embezzle, cook the books, take whatever we can? This might be the case if he were to say, "so they will welcome you into their homes." But he says, "when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." "When it is gone ..." If we think about this we realize, that he is reminding us of the injunction to sell everything and give to the poor. And then, having shrewdly employed tainted money for the benefit of others, as God wishes, we will be welcomed into the many rooms of God's house, our ultimate home.

Jesus goes on to admonish us in three different ways about consistency. If honesty is important, it must be throughout our lives in everything we do. We cannot cheat our employer and then faithfully pledge to the church and think all is well. Honesty must characterize us throughout. Faithfulness is not merely a matter of

worship and belonging, it extends to our financial dealings. How we deal with little things will determine whether we even have the opportunity to deal with big things.

Having said all this, Jesus sums up very directly: no one can serve two masters. Therefore you cannot serve God and wealth.

The rich man and his manager were both faithful, unconflicted servants of wealth. It was their prime motivation. They understood each other and operated out of a consistent worldview. Jesus clearly says that this worldview is alien to God and the Kingdom of God.

It separates us from our true selves and the life God wants for us. This should not surprise us, since throughout the Bible financial and power relationships are what is most often cited as separating us from God.

It is a challenge to anyone living in a 21st century western, or western influenced, culture to live out this injunction. The God of our culture is wealth. We are enjoined continually to seek out ways to maximize our own wealth at the expense of everyone else. Did something bad happen? Sue somebody. You are entitled to financial compensation. Everything can be made better with money. High school and college students are continually advised to choose their courses, majors, and internships based on what will generate the best income – not what will serve humanity, improve the community, encourage spiritual growth, or anything else but make money, preferably lots, reliably, for a long time.

We are human. We are insecure and dependent. The world is very hard for people who do not have enough money to support themselves. Money does offer opportunities. But if we succumb to this mindset, then we have allowed wealth to become our prime motivation. And Jesus says we cannot do that and still worship God, because we have allowed the pursuit of wealth to supplant God in our lives and in our hearts.

It is always very hard to be accused of idolatry, of worshiping something that is not God. But if we examine our hearts closely, I suspect the majority of us would find that at the very least we are every day tempted to join the ranks of the worshipers of Mammon, money, wealth, financial security – whatever name we choose.

Watch out, Jesus says. Don't succumb. Be true children of the Kingdom and deal with money as if the center of your life and aspiration is a deep relationship with God and the people of God.

He says that the children of this world are much better than we are at dealing with money. The question is are we as devoted to our God as they are to theirs, or are we simply less good at following theirs – we cannot do both.

Jesus is being harsh in this reading and it can be discouraging to contemplate, like being scolded. I want to offer two antidotes to discouragement.

The first is in the reading from Jeremiah. It is a cry of extraordinary grief. "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. ... For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" It might strike you as odd that I find comfort in this

passage. This is the prophet expressing his own anguish which is a reflection of God's, anguish at the suffering of the people brought on by their idolatry, by their putting self-interest and selfishness in the place of devotion to God. When we wander, as all of us do, it hurts God's heart. This is not wrath; it is compassion and concern. This tells me that when Jesus was saying all that, it was not in the scolding tone of, "Look out! You could be in big trouble." Rather, it was with the desire of helping us to find the good, true path, the way to a fulfilling life. God's heart breaks when we turn away and God is always calling us back.

The second might seem equally odd. This week the steeple of Saint George's Episcopal Church in Flushing, Queens, New York was flattened by a freak 'tornado-like storm'. You may now be thinking that I am not very good at good news and consolation. But I found much occasion of encouragement and rejoicing in this story.

Saint George's congregation was first established in 1702. They finally had a church building in 1746, but they were not granted a royal charter until their steeple and its bell were added. King George III granted their parish charter in 1761, the first year of his reign.

One of their wardens signed the Declaration of Independence. Their rector at the time of the charter was Samuel Seabury, who went on to become the first Anglican Bishop in America. Other rectors, including William Augustus Muhlenberg, contributed greatly to the church at large.

Through three centuries, the parish has grown, changed, and met the needs it found. They provided the first school in the area and have had extensive outreach appropriate to the needs of each time.

The area continues to have large immigrant populations, as always. Now they have not only two English-language services, but also one Spanish-language service, and one Chinese-language service, presided over by the first person born in mainland China to become an Episcopal priest.

When the steeple fell the other night, the assistant rector and a team of lay people were preparing a dinner for the congregation. The rubble from the steeple blocked the whole street, so only the small group was there to eat the dinner, but they were also there to receive the 200-year-old cross from rescued from the rubble.

I find in Saint George's a parable of resilience and optimism. They have twice rebuilt their building, now there will be a third, at least partial, rebuilding.

They survived a revolution and a civil war. They have experienced ever-changing waves of immigration, depressions and recessions, always there, serving God and the people of God.

This is how they describe themselves on their website: "We come from several backgrounds, from places throughout Asia, the Americas, Africa and Europe. We hold varied points of view and are in different places in our spiritual journey. We share a common desire to enter more deeply into the life God has for us in Christ Jesus. We invite you to explore our community. Discover the gift God has for you, find your place to belong."

They are a center of hospitality and hope and I have every confidence they will continue to flourish in new and exciting ways, as true worshipers of God.

In Jesus' story and admonition I find a challenge to all of us. In God's yearning grief and in the story of Saint George's, I find hope that we can rise to that challenge to be the people God calls us to be, with all of the opportunity and adventure that promises. Amen.