

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 25th, 2016
Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost: The Use of Money*
Rev. John Crow

Amos 6:1-7
Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:11-19
Luke 16:19-31

Tomorrow our country will experience the time-honored tradition of a presidential debate. Based on how the campaigning has gone so far, I think I am safe in making one prediction: we will hear a great deal of *political speak*, where words are used as weapons and truth is either stretched or outright ignored. Unfortunately, many Americans have come to expect this, and we easily excuse the dishonesty of our politicians.

That is not the case at church. I don't believe any of you would be sitting here today if you did not expect to hear God's truth proclaimed. It is in God's house where we have a duty to respect the meaning of words and live by their implications, even if we would rather avoid doing so. You may have noticed that the use of money is a common theme of our Scripture lessons today. This is a continuation of last week's theme. In an unusual way, all four lessons employ different methods to touch on a different aspect of God's teaching about money,

*Title borrowed from John Wesley's 1760 sermon of the same name.

so that my sermon would be incomplete without addressing all of them in turn. We will start with an indirect instruction, followed by an illustrative example, and then prophetic condemnation, and finally a simple statement. Because this is the Word of God dealing with a very sensitive topic, I have to warn you that this sermon may not be a pleasant experience for you. You may feel convicted—I know I have. When we're done, this may be one of those days you wish you had stayed home. So I earnestly pray that you will open your ears, your hearts, and your souls to what the Holy Spirit might want to you hear today.

What I am calling an indirect instruction is more specifically an instruction to teach, which we find in 1 Timothy 6. It is interesting that unlike earlier parts of Paul's letter to Timothy, here he seems to be specifically addressing his recipient, as opposed to making more generalized instructions that would apply to all who heard his letter read. Verses seventeen and eighteen particularly focus on the use of money, but instead of addressing those in the church who may be financially well-off, Paul speaks to Timothy, and those who may instruct church members who are wealthy.

In verse seventeen we find Paul warning first against the pride that can result from wealth. I see two obvious ways that wealth can lead to pride: one, by making one feel puffed up about their accomplishments; and two, by making one feel completely in control and secure in their wealth. This leads into the second warning of verse seventeen, which is against putting one's hope in financial security. Pastor Thelander addressed this very issue last week. Our true hope can only be in the Lord.

In the next verse we find Paul instructing Timothy to teach those who are financially well-off to be generous. Of course, we should **all** be generous, but I believe Paul says this not only because the wealthy have the most to give, but also because it seems somehow that the more assets one has, the harder it is to share them. Isn't that backwards? Doesn't that seem absurd? And yet, from what I've seen in life, it does seem to be true about the human condition. I've seen orphans in a back-woods Russian orphanage sharing the food off their plates, when they didn't have enough to eat, and I've seen American kids not want to share a small portion of their massive haul of Halloween candy with another child. John Wesley said that it is for nothing if we gain all we can and save all we can, without giving all we can. ["The Use of Money," [John Wesley's Sermons](#), 355]

A third reason to be generous is what it does for the soul of the giver. For most, generosity does not come naturally, and must be cultivated. Generosity is a powerful act because it goes completely against our instincts of self-preservation, and becomes a tangible element in living *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

We find the illustrative example that I mentioned earlier in today's reading from the latter part of Luke chapter 16. This is a continuation from last week's reading, where the connection is strengthened by the almost identical beginnings of these two passages in the original Greek; the only difference being the common Greek particle "de," meaning, "now," "and," or "but." [*Anthropos de tis hain ploosios.*]

If you like to get technical about such things, this passage is considered somewhat unique as parables go because it doesn't follow all the normal rules of parables. But it is a parable, so let's focus on what it teaches, and not get distracted by its depiction of the afterlife. What is important for us to come away with today, is a single thought: One cannot be a Christian and be callous to the suffering of others. This story illustrates this lesson perfectly by painting the vivid picture of a man whose life is filled with pleasure, wanting for nothing, but who in the end is condemned for his failure to care at all for the poor and sickly man who laid at the

gates of his mansion. In the afterlife, Lazarus (which means “God helps”), is comforted, while the rich man suffers—and justly so. This is what Darrell Bock calls an “eschatological reversal.” In other words, the two had their positions reversed in eternity. Sadly, many are headed for this kind of reversal, and don’t even know it.

Before I move on, I want to make one thing clear. Had the rich man ignored the calling of the Spirit, and yet shared what he had with Lazarus, he still would have ended up as he did. A generous pagan is still a pagan. This parable is allowing those who heard it to make certain assumptions about the characters based on how they behave, and how they were treated in the afterlife.

The third lesson on the use of money comes from the prophetic condemnation which we find in Amos chapter six. In many ways, this passage is the most challenging one of all. Amos was one who didn’t see himself as a “professional prophet,” but rather as a shepherd who was called to deliver God’s message against the corrupt wealthy class. If this were today, his shirt might have read, “Occupy Bethel.” Not surprisingly, his message of judgement was not well received. Israel at this time was a place of economic extremes, where the

powerful and wealthy exploited the poor both through legal and illegal means.

In other words, Amos prophesied against greed as a systemic sin.

It is this broader story of Amos is the great challenge for 21st century Americans.

Systemic sin is so difficult to deal with because it is built into the very systems we

live by every day. Our legal system and economic system today are built upon

Christian principles, but have strayed far from their roots. Systemic sin evolves

from many acts of personal sin by many people over time that become built into a

system such that the harm becomes hard to see, while the whole system

maintains respectability. Don't think that just because you may not see it with

your own eyes, that exploitation doesn't happen today. As John Wesley taught,

we should "gain all we can without hurting our neighbor." [351] As Christians we

need to avoid not only personally exploiting others, but also of supporting a

system that exploits the vulnerable.

This is far easier said than done, and just as the message of Amos was rejected in

his day, we shouldn't expect anyone to be welcomed for standing up to the rich

and powerful today. If, for example, Hershey's buys the beans to make its

chocolate from an African company that employs slave laborers, how are we to

know that, and what are we to do about it? While we all may be called to various degrees of action against systemic sin, the one thing I can urge all of us to do is pray—pray that doing the right thing in business and government won't be swallowed whole by greed. I also want us, as Christians to avoid blindly putting our stamp of approval on something simply because it is what we are accustomed to. The stakes are high. Unlike the eschatological reversal we saw in Luke's lesson, we aren't looking at the judgment of a single man for his callousness, but of every person who knowingly partakes of a system built on greed and a thirst for power.

The final of today's lessons that applies to the use of money is a simple statement that comes from Psalm 146. This is challenging because if you have made it this far without feeling convicted, don't get too comfortable. Just when you felt like you could pat yourself on the back for being generous, caring, and wise in the systems you partake of, we read in verse seven that all justice and generosity comes from God. If we are instruments of such things, it is only because the Holy Spirit has so empowered us—we can't take the credit.

So as we prepare to come to the table and share in the Eucharist, let us do so with a renewed sense of our roles as stewards—temporary managers—of God’s resources. Let us trust in God, and not financial security. Let us not hold back when we can give. Let us avoid anything that exploits another. And let us not be prideful in our meager accomplishments. Most of us in this sanctuary have been at Epworth a long time. We tend to assume that everyone here is a follower of Christ. If that is not the case; if you have not previously allowed Christ into your heart, then I want to encourage you to do so right now. Even if you applied everything I’ve just talked about, but didn’t have Jesus Christ in your heart, you would still be standing on the wrong side of the fence. Don’t let that happen to you. Accept Christ and join your new family at the banquet to which Jesus himself has invited you.