

Proper 20 C 2010 (SVSP Sunday, September 19, 2010)

Amos 8:4-7  
Psalm 113  
1 Timothy 2:1-7  
Luke 16:1-13

Two questions

Give many of us food for thought,  
No matter how much or how little we have  
Of money and possessions.

Two questions –

One is fun,  
And one is fearful.

What would I do if I won the lottery?

Surely a lot of us wonder that,  
As we drive past the lottery billboards  
Advertising the millions up for grabs.  
At least once in a while,  
Whether we buy tickets or not,  
Whether we already have plenty, or not,  
Many of us ask ourselves,  
What would I do,  
If a big pot of gold landed in my lap?

And then there's the other question,  
The one that rises up unbidden  
As we look at pictures  
Of people returning to their vanished homes  
In Fourmile Canyon.

What would I do if I lost everything?

Two questions that invite us  
to think about a radically different life,  
a life with much more or much less.

We can wonder what it would be like,  
We can spin out scenarios,  
But we can hardly imagine what we would really do  
Unless we know how we respond  
To the question Jesus offers us today.

Do I serve God, or money?

Before we jump into thinking  
That there's a right answer to this question,  
Let's remember that Jesus invites us first,  
Before we try to respond,  
To get inside a parable,  
And let the parable get inside us.

It just so happens  
That the parable he tells,  
The story of the shrewd manager,  
Is possibly the most difficult one we know.

There are two ways to go forward here.

One would be to take the parable apart  
And look at all the pieces,  
And ask,  
Over and over again,  
What is Jesus telling us here?  
How does this make sense?

Another choice  
Would be to listen to this parable  
And hear it as a counterpoint,  
A contrast,  
To another story.  
In the parable of the shrewd manager  
Jesus shows us one way of living in the world.  
It's a real way,

A way chosen by many people.  
It has definite advantages.

And it is a way  
In stark contrast  
To the way chosen  
By the father of two sons.  
In that story,  
Where the father rejoices  
As he welcomes home the prodigal,  
Jesus expresses the heart of the gospel.

Now, I know that looking at the world  
In terms of either/or  
Has become an old-fashioned paradigm,  
And I like many of you  
Have tried to look at any number of situations  
In terms of both/and.  
Often that's a way to move forward.  
That might be true here too,  
But if so,  
I don't see it yet.  
What I do see  
Is that if you set today's parable up against  
The story of the man with two sons,  
If you let this be an either/or situation,  
A compelling choice becomes more clear.

Both stories begin with a fact of life.  
We are bound to squander  
At least some of what we have been given.  
Part of the pain of being human  
Is that we can acknowledge  
The abundance of what we have received,  
Each of us,  
Through the simple gift of life,  
And yet we cannot nurture and enjoy that gift

As carefully and joyfully  
As we would hope to.

Whether we think of ourselves as careful and cautious  
Or rash and impulsive,  
All of us squander some of the riches  
We have been given,  
Physical health or material wealth  
Or intelligence or kindness of heart,  
Or life itself.  
All of us have riches beyond our imagining,  
Simply because we have within us the breath of life,  
And all of us squander some of those riches,  
No matter what.  
That's part of being human.

The prodigal son squanders  
the inheritance he has demanded,  
And the shrewd manager squanders  
The property entrusted to him.

When the moment of truth comes,  
There are two ways to respond.  
One is to turn around,  
Seek forgiveness, and join the party.  
Another is to rig the deck,  
Change the rules of the game,  
And win.  
Both are real possibilities.  
One is the gospel.  
The other is business as usual.  
It's a choice.

Remember,  
In some ways,  
The parable is happening inside us.  
We play all the roles.

We are the squanderer who wakes up to the truth,  
And we are the one who must respond.

Again, two ways open up.  
The father comes running from the house,  
Embraces his son,  
And calls for music and dancing.  
The master commends the manager.  
He says something like this,  
Nice work. I would have done the same myself  
If I had thought of it.  
Now I want you to do that kind of work for me.

One is God's world.  
One is a world where money is the boss.

You can live in the same world  
In one of these two ways.  
Which one is yours?  
You cannot go both ways at once.

Here's the trick:  
There's money in each of these worlds.  
God's world has money in it too –  
Sometimes a lot of it.  
Jesus cares a lot about money,  
Because he knows it's an essential part of life;  
It's what we use to make our lives work.  
It's not about a world with money or a world without money.  
It's about knowing where your heart lies.

Either God rules your world,  
And you live in a climate of repentance and welcome and joy,  
Or money rules your world,  
And the more shrewd you are,  
The greater the rewards.

So, where does your heart lie?  
You can serve God,  
And let the money serve you.

I can serve the money,  
But if I do,  
I won't be serving God.  
The money will be at the center,  
And God on the side.  
It's a choice.

We can try to figure it out  
By looking at this stark choice,  
Or we can go back to the stories,  
Where Jesus is waiting,  
And ask this,  
Which story do I want to live in?

The good news is this:  
God is always in the story,  
Either at the center,  
Opening welcoming arms to embrace us  
As we make our way home,  
Or waiting, watching,  
Hoping for the moment  
When we will turn around.

Whichever way we choose,  
God will be there.  
At the center or waiting out of sight,  
God is there, and God is here.  
We can choose our story.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, this would be the place to end,

On an ordinary Sunday.  
But today is different.

Today is the day we begin the second phase  
Of the capital campaign  
That has allowed us to expand our church home.

In our life together,  
This is a time for examining our history and hopes.  
And it is a time when those hopes  
Are made concrete  
In choices each of us will make about money.

So I'm going to ask you to do something.

Before you fill out your SVSP pledge card,  
Take some time to enter into these parables again.  
Which story do you live in?  
The prodigal son or the shrewd manager?  
When you find yourself in one of these stories,  
When you discover which story lives inside you,  
Then you may be able to ask yourself,  
Where does my loyalty rest?  
What is my primary allegiance?  
Do I serve God? Or money?

Let yourself be honest.  
These are two very real ways of being in the world.  
Only you know which one is yours.

You know what is in your own heart.  
You know which parable fits you.

If you know which story is your story now,  
That may guide you  
As you ask the questions  
You need to ask before you make a pledge.

You know what your resources are,  
Whether they be a life of prayer,  
Or boundless energy,  
Or usable skills, or vast wealth.

It is your choice how to use them.

The gift of money you offer to this campaign  
And to our life together  
May be large or small,  
Depending on what you have to offer,  
And depending on what matters to you.

There is no one right answer for any of us.  
What matters is that we listen to the voice of Jesus,  
Let him enter our hearts,  
Let him ask his questions,  
And then respond.

You can choose.  
It's your story –  
The story of your life with God.