September 22, 2013 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)

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Jesus talks about money a lot in Luke. Today's Gospel provides a bridge between the story of the Prodigal Son and the story of the rich man and Lazarus, which we'll hear about next week. This story has a kind of weird take on money that can be kind of challenging to us.

In this story we have a rich man and his steward. The steward gets fired after the rich man accuses him of squandering his assets. The steward, who may or may not deserve his dishonest title – it could be that he was just inept – jumps into action and reviews his options. He's not much of a hard labor guy, so ditch digging is out, and he's way too full of his own importance to beg on the street. So he hits on the scheme of letting his former employer's debtors off lightly in order that they would feel that they owed him one when it came time to mooch off of them.

But the scheme strangely backfires on him. In trying to help himself, he collects enough of a percentage of the rich man's backlog of debts that he impresses the rich man. We're not really told that he gets his old job back, but it would be too much of a stretch to infer it.

Here's where this story makes a lot of people, myself included, uncomfortable. Here is this scoundrel, who gets rewarded for trying to save his own bacon. It doesn't seem very fair, in the grand scheme of things. Even Luke seems to have trouble figuring out how to interpret this one. Usually Jesus provides one nice interpretation of some of his trickier parables, but here he provides THREE – and all of them are equally confusing.

And then he caps it off with the familiar phrase, "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." This may have been the whole point of this parable, and it can be pretty hard to hear because Jesus is telling us to make a choice – worship God or worship money. It's impossible to do both, he says. Not a lot of wiggle room there.

One of the reasons that this passage may make people uncomfortable is that it really forces us to look at our relationship with money and wealth. To say we sometimes aren't very comfortable talking about money, and specifically, talking about money and God, is an understatement. Oh we'll talk about how money is scarce, and how times are tough all over, but when it comes to looking at our budget as a theological statement of our faith, we squirm.

But that's just what it is – our budget is a theological statement of our faith. Before you called me, you all here at Grace made the theological statement that a full-time rector was what this community needed to be able to best serve God. And I thank God you did – not just because you called ME, but because you had the courage to take a leap of faith and put your trust in God. It was a brave, brave thing to do.

But what does our budget say about us? Now is the time to continue the work you set in motion several years ago. We need to do two things – we need to expand our outreach and we need protect our endowment. Not as a "Good Investment," but as a theological statement that we intend to be here, as a community, serving the people of Huron, for a long, long time.

I know I've said in the past that the worst thing that could happen to Grace would NOT be to run out of money, but rather not to serve God with all of our mind, energy, and spirit. To sit back and not do the work we have been given to do – THAT would be the worst thing to happen to Grace. And that's still true. But we are also stewards of what we've been given to work with, and it's ours to protect.

Let me be clear. It's not ours to hoard. It's not ours to hoard any more than it's ours to squander. Our endowment truly belongs to God and we need to keep telling ourselves that every day. But we also need to be realistic. And that means trying to get back to the place where we're taking less and less out of the principal so Grace will be here for future generations.

There are basically three ways to grow our endowment – add new members, encourage legacy giving, and pledge more. Adding new members these days is a function of outreach, and we're starting to really get some exciting things going there. And we're NOT doing outreach to get butts in pews, but rather because the people we're serving or will serve NEED services that we can provide. This is wonderful and it will grow our church. We have a good start, but we can do even more.

Legacy giving is something that we haven't talked about much, but that we benefit from every day. Basically, it's leaving something to Grace in our wills. It's a wonderful gift that comes with a sad price, because it means that we will have lost one of our beloved community, which is hard to contemplate. We can, and probably will, talk about that at a later time, but let's move on to our third option.

Here's where we get really uncomfortable. The Church – the whole Church, not just Grace – is a bottomless well into which we could throw all of our resources and still not fill it up. So in spite of the fact that I'm talking about protecting our endowment right now, we really should get away from the notion that there will EVER be enough money. So should we throw good money after bad? Is the Church a good investment? If I have only so much money and so many places to put it, why should I give it to what many are calling a dying institution? And what am I getting for my money?

I think these are the wrong questions. These questions come from the world, and we should be trying to answer the questions that come from God. Do we believe that everything comes from God, and everything we have, and have to give back, is ours by the grace of God? Do we believe that we have an obligation to give back to God? How much should we give? What theological statement are we making in our manner of giving? Just how grateful ARE we?

We can answer some of those questions as a community, but some have to be answered individually in each of our hearts. This may help, or it may confuse things more, but I'm going to bring up what to some is a nasty word. That word is TITHE.

Let me share my history with that word. I actually sort of hate it. When I was very young I had a friend who belonged to a very evangelical church. She got me to go to a couple of revival meetings with her and they threw around that word a lot. So I got to associate the word tithe with the emotionally manipulative tactics of these revival meetings, and to this day it creeps me out.

On a side note, I'm still in touch with that friend and I think she doesn't quite know what to make of the fact that I'm now a priest. It kind of tickles me…

But back to tithe. Really, it's just a derivative of an Old English word that means a "tenth." It's a perfectly harmless, descriptive word. In the Bible, the concept of giving a tenth is found all through the Old Testament. And though the earliest Christians didn't really practice it, it came slowly into use in the Church throughout the centuries. And it wasn't just money. The earliest Biblical tithes were agricultural – giving God a tenth of ones crops, right off the top –

and at our last Vestry meeting I shared a little bit about the 12th century mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, who was a tenth child and given as a tithe to the church.

So giving a tenth of our income has its roots in our earliest Biblical history, and has been a part of our Christian tradition for centuries. Where does that leave us? Does this have any meaning to us today?

I think it does. To me, it is a way of not just supporting the church and what we can do with that money, but the tithe specifically ties us symbolically to all those who have gone before us in the faith. It ties us together as a Church, as the Body of Christ.

And it shows God that we're paying attention. That we're grateful for all that God has given us and provided for us. It shows that we have faith that we will be able to be okay, even without that sizeable chunk of our income. It shows trust.

But it's not a requirement. In older times, the Church had the power to exact a tenth of everyone's income, through the power of excommunication and the Inquisition. I think this was wrong, and is still wrong if it's being practiced anywhere today. Whatever you give back to God has to be just that – a gift, given out of gratitude. If it's forced, it doesn't represent faith, it represents fear.

So I'm not demanding, nor would I ever demand, any level of giving. But I'm asking you to think about it for this coming year. On a practical note, our Diocesan assessment is going up by, I think, 5% this year, so in order to just stay even we have to try to make that up in our pledges for next year.

But even without that incentive, think about increasing your pledge as your personal theological statement of faith. Think about tithing, and how it connects us to the history and tradition of our faith, and what it says to God about how grateful we are for all that he provides out his pure love for us.

That's it. Just think about it. Talk about it, in your families, or to me if you want. Pray about it. And do what you believe in your heart is right. Right for you, right for the church, and right for God.

Amen.