

“Values”
Pastor Jennifer Shaw
St. John’s Lutheran Church, Palm Desert

A nation that saw itself as blessed by God was enjoying a time of relative stability. This allowed it to develop an economic system that concentrated on the mass production of items for export – like grain, olive oil, and wine. Over time, those who owned the means of production grew increasingly wealthy. They bought land out from under family farms and small villages to grow their cash crops. The land was overworked, exhausting the soil and depleting the population of grazing animals. This led to rising prices for basic goods. People with few resources were being forced into debt servitude or day labor. There was widespread poverty and hunger

Those who committed this injustice knew better, or they should have. They had the Bible, the Word of God, the commandments of the Lord, which showed them how to live in their time and place in right relationship with the Lord and each other and the whole creation. Including the commandment to observe the Sabbath, the 7th day of the week – a disruption from business as usual; a rest from labor for all people and animals and the land. A day to honor the Lord, who rested on the 7th day after creating the heavens and the earth.

They also had a commandment to celebrate the Jubilee year every 50th year, every generation – a year of rest for the land. A year for families to return to their ancestral homes. A year when debts were to be forgiven and indentured servants were to be set free. A year to give people a break, a fresh start, opportunities for the future.

They also had the commandments: not to take advantage of workers, but pay them their wages in a timely manner; not to charge interest; not to deny justice to the poor in legal proceedings; to leave some grain after the harvest to be collected by the poor and the immigrant; to be honest in selling goods at a fair price; to provide and care for the vulnerable members of society – widow and orphan, homeless and outcast, poor and in need

The prophet Amos [8:4-7] called on his listeners to keep these commandments, to turn from their injustice and turn to the Lord. He called out those with wealth, with resources, with power, for trampling the needy and ruining the lives of the poor; for dishonoring Sabbath worship with the impatient desire to get back to the marketplace; for deceitful business practices; for callous disregard for the value of all human life.

Amos, like his fellow prophets, reminds us that we cannot disconnect our worship of God from our treatment of the people God made and loves. As the community of the Lord, we are to care for the spiritual and physical needs of others, especially the poor and vulnerable among us. We are to

do what the Lord has told us is good to do, “act with justice, embrace loving kindness, walk humbly with God,” as the prophet Micah [6:8] puts it.

The words of Jesus recounted in Luke [16:1-13] resonate with the words of the prophets before him: “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

The parable that precedes this statement is a tough one. There’s no scholarly consensus as to what it means. There are a lot of possibilities, and they’re all challenging.

Perhaps Jesus is giving the manager as a negative example. If even the debt collector of a land baron is wise enough to know that the best use of worldly wealth is to make friends and influence people, how much more should followers of Jesus be wise enough to know that no amount of material prosperity can compare with the value of lasting and loving friendships with God and each other.

We are not called to be naïve about money, or disconnect our finances from our faith, or think that our material wealth has no impact on our spiritual wellbeing. God wants all of us, including our wallet. We are to use whatever resources we have wisely, to build relationships and not damage them, to help people and not hurt them.

Perhaps Jesus is giving the manager as a positive example. While the rich man thought the manager was squandering his money, the manager was using that money for good. If even a wise steward working within the system can use the little authority he has to forgive debts, ease burdens, benefit those in need, how much more should followers of Jesus use the resources God had given us for God’s life-giving work. In a direct statement after the parable, Jesus says that how we handle the small stuff is how we handle the big stuff. Or, as Richard Rohr puts it, ‘how we do one thing is how we do everything.’ Small or large acts of selfishness are still selfish; small or large acts of generosity are still generous.

Perhaps this parable is not only about the individuals in it, but the whole system of which they we are part: the worldly system of wealth. A system that idolizes the rich and famous; increases the income of billionaires while millions suffer in poverty; rewards predatory financial practices; values profit over people; celebrates selfishness as a virtue and denigrates generosity as a weakness.

Whatever we make of this puzzling parable, the statement that Jesus makes after it is clear “You cannot serve God and wealth”

The word translated “wealth” is the Greek word *mammon*, a transliteration from the Aramaic, meaning a lot of money, property, material goods. Some scholars believe it was also the proper name for the Syrian god of riches, that is, the god of money.

In the words of Martin Luther on the 1st Commandment: “A ‘god’ is a term for that to which we look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart...Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your god...[for example] There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that they care for no one else. They, too, have a god – mammon by name, that is, money and property – on which they set their whole heart. This is the most common idol on earth.”

Will we serve the false god of mammon or the true God embodied in Christ Jesus?

Throughout his public ministry Jesus spoke good news to the poor – whatever society may tell you, you have infinite value and dignity and worth given to you directly by the God of all creation. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, freed people from demonic oppression. Jesus gathered and mentored disciples from various social and economic backgrounds. He told them not to take money or supplies when he sent them out to teach and heal. Jesus gave his time, attention, and care to those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Jesus himself was born in a stable, lived the life of an itinerate preacher, and was buried in a borrowed tomb.

Jesus gave himself for us. Though he is God, he emptied himself and joined with us in our humanity. Though he was without sin, he stood among the sinners being baptized in the Jordan River. Though he was righteous, he embraced the unrighteous. Though he was innocent, he allowed himself to be arrested and tried. Though he was crucified, he rose from death to life. Though he is rich beyond measure, he made himself poor, so that he might share with us the riches of eternal and abundant life. As the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy [2:1-7], there is only one God, and one mediator between God and us, Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord, who gave himself to redeem us all.

Researcher Michael Norton, in his Ted Talk, states, “if you think money can’t buy you happiness, you’re not spending it right.” He asserts that the reason money makes us unhappy is that we’re always spending it on ourselves. In studies his team did in countries throughout the world, there was a direct correlation between spending money on others and increased happiness. And so, he advises, “Think less about how can I spend money on myself, and more about what can I do to benefit other people.”

How might you spend your money to benefit others? How might you heed the call of Amos and work for justice for the poor and vulnerable? How might you rest and resist the relentless consumerism of our culture? How might you repair relationships broken over financial matters? How might you serve the Lord in whom all real treasures are found? Amen.