

**Sermon for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost Proper 20, September 23, 2007 Yr B**  
**Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 Psalm 79:1-9 Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-13**  
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*You cannot serve God and money.*

One might be tempted to say, “Here we go again, another sermon on money!” Well not exactly. Granted, Jesus did preach much more about money than he did about sexual issues and modern day preachers tend to preach more about sexual issues than money. But this reading is not about money and, even more so, it is about a variety of issues.

The word “serve” is a rather unfortunate translation in terms of *you cannot serve God and money*. The word that is translated to mean “serve” more literally means “to be enslaved to” or “to be controlled by” The same word is used in the story of the Prodigal son where the older brother says to his Father, *For all these years I have been working like a slave for you.*

The two masters that Jesus referenced are: ‘God’ and ‘wealth.’ Some of us are young enough to remember when the translation was “God and mammon.” *Mamon* came from the Greek word *Mamonas*. It seems that in the original Aramaic, Jesus was using a play on words by using words that have the same root word; ‘faithful’ ‘entrust’ “mammon”. And we miss these puns in our English translation.

However, the point remains the same, there are two masters, God and wealth and they cannot be served simultaneously; or to put it another way; it is impossible to become “controlled by” or “enslaved to” God **and** wealth.

Most church going people do not consider themselves as controlled by wealth or controlled by anything. Despite this state of denial, the reality is that there are many church active individuals who are enslaved to unhealthy

behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, workaholism, volunteerism, religion, etc. It would seem that the issue for Jesus may have been *materialism* and he saw a lot of it in places like the city of Sefhra and other growing cities in the area.

What Jesus was concerned about was the squandering of gifts. Each and all of us have specific gifts and talents given to us by God to be used, as St. Paul would say, for the glory of God and the good of the community. The problem arises when we do not want to share these God-given gifts for others; Or, we only want to use them for our personal enrichment.

Selfish and self-centered individuals have a tendency to focus on their own special needs and wants. They do not see the needs of others inside or outside of church. This is also true of the Institutional Church. Following the Reformation, and for the next four hundred years, many churches ceased meaningful contact with other churches. They focused on their own beliefs, caring for their own people, developing their own belief systems. It was not until after the Vatican Council of 1958-63 that many of the churches began to have conversations again and realize that they had more in common than in differences and began to work toward the gift of reconciliation.

In many ways it can be said that the Institutional church squandered its gifts for four hundred years. We professed love and forgiveness but we did not live it out in the community. We professed care for those on the fringe of society but we did little to alleviate their situation, as we believed that that was the role of the Government and we should not get involved. The Institutional church stood by and hid, for the most part, the gifts and talents of hundreds and thousands of intelligent men and women by prohibiting them from participating in education and govern-mental issues.

The manager, in this mornings' short gospel story, was quick to respond to the idea of being unemployed. Notice the first thing he did, he took a personal inventory of himself; *What will I do not that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.* To know what we are capable of it is important to take a fearless and moral inventory of ourselves. In doing so we acknowledge our strengths and weaknesses so that when we seek help we will know what it is that we are looking for.

Someone once said that the church and restaurants have a lot in common. Each wants to attract people to come and receive what they have to offer. Restaurants offer food for the body, Churches offer food for the soul. The attractiveness of the restaurant is more than just food and good service; other aspects are good location, bathrooms, ambiance, attentiveness to customers, especially new comers. Some restaurants do great business and others go out of business sometimes quickly.

Can the church learn from the wisdom of the world? Can churches become better houses of God and spreaders of the gospel by studying the market policies of restaurants? Are things like clean bathrooms, greeters, the perceived attitude of an usher, the look of the church bulletin affect the newcomer or the regular attendant? Bishop Benfield reminds us again and again that many newcomers have decided within the first ten minutes if they plan to stay with the church and more often than not much depends on the quality and kind of music they hear. Should the church membership and leadership not be just as concerned about such little details as a good restaurant?

A few years ago a Roman Catholic nun was giving a talk on the concept of Ministry. For her, ministry was taking care of the little things. While it was the function of the **Administrator** to be aware of the details, he or she also saw the larger picture. The larger picture could not become a reality unless the little details were taken care of also. As Jesus put it; *Whoever is faithful in very little is faithful in much.*

*The children of this generation are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light.*

Without getting into the moral or legal issues of the action of the manager, the reality is that he was shrewd. He was quick to think about his future and what he needed to do to win friends. In the end, and here is the humor in the story, he was praised for the very things for which he got fired. He builds his future by doing what he was accused of doing in the first place. He is wasting his master's profits. He also puts his master in a position of accepting the reduced amounts or losing face with his debtors. By reducing the large debts, he will gain the trust or reward of the debtors. He is working on the assumption that they will follow the unspoken social rules that the benefit received requires a benefit in return. In other words, since the amount the debtors will now have to pay is less, they will be forced to do him a good turn and in that action lies his shrewdness.

So, how are we to think about our future? Jesus says *Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added on to you.* In other words, get your priorities straight. What is of importance to you. The landowner with the great crops opted to build better barns so he could have plenty. The rich man and Lazarus is a clear picture of a man who was so caught up with

himself he did not see the beggar at his gate. In all these stories, the issue is not wealth but being ensnared by it. Perhaps there is a good reason why we refer to a certain piece of plastic as Master Card; perhaps it controls our lives?

In reviewing the big picture of our lives, we look to the future, which can be any time, and ask ourselves if we are doing ministry, if we are taking care of the little things in life; if we are in fact giving a cup of water to someone in the name of Christ.

There are days we become so busy we do not have time to smell the roses. However, in God's time, we do not have the luxury to not smell the roses, listen to the birds, or give someone the time of day. The Good News is this; If we permit ourselves to be enslaved by God, we will know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will understand the word serenity and we will know peace. We will realize that it is through dealing with our past that we are able to help others. Being enslaved to God will permit self-seeking to slip away, change our attitude and outlook on life and our fears will leave us. By being enslaved by God, serving God, letting God work through us, we will intuitively know how to handle situations that used to baffle us and then we will see that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.