

Faithful in Much

One of my father's sayings was "Never steal for less than a million dollars." It was a kind of joke, I suppose, but it was also a spiritual discipline – for him and then for me. Think of all the times that small opportunities come along to take financial advantage of someone else: a clerk gives you change for a twenty when you had actually given him a ten; a package is delivered to you in error; you accidentally walk out of a store carrying something you forgot to pay for. It is devilishly easy to just keep walking: to take the extra change, keep the package, or tell yourself you will pay the next time you are there. I have to tell you that whenever one of those comes up, I hear my dad saying "Never steal for less than a million dollars." And so I say it, as I return the money or the package or the merchandise; it is a joke, but it is also a way not to sound too goody-goody.

It was not until I returned to church as a thirty-something adult that I realized Jesus had said pretty much the same thing: "*Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.*" [Luke 16:10] I am afraid that we most often hear these words as a moral imperative, when what they really are is a description of a spiritual discipline. The management of resources – and in our time, particularly the use of money – can be a powerful spiritual discipline.

Those terms may seem to be odd bed-fellows: management, money, spiritual discipline. We usually think of spiritual disciplines as being practices like prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, and the like. But a spiritual discipline is any habit through which we live our faith in an intentional, regular way. Because money is so much a part of our daily lives, it provides frequent opportunities for being intentional and faithful. My first stewardship sermon 16 years ago asserted that our spiritual values are most dramatically revealed by our checkbooks and our calendars. Even though the checkbooks and calendars are often on our computers or PDA's now, they are still theologically revealing documents about ourselves.

If you were listening carefully to the Gospel reading, however, you may be a little puzzled at how Jesus got around to his statement about honesty and dishonesty. The story he tells is about a dishonest manager: faced with losing his job because he was accused of squandering his master's property, he ingratiates himself with all of the master's debtors so that he will have friends later. The story is, I think, also about a morally bankrupt master, who *commended* the dishonest manager for being shrewd. The conclusion Jesus reaches (with a little less clarity than we would like!) is that worldly people ("children of this age") are both shiftier and better at detecting shiftiness than followers of Jesus ("children of light").

By the way, this parable is so odd that it has spawned a great number of curious interpretations – for example, that the dishonest manager was actually just giving up his commission on those debts, and so was actually acting honestly. There is nothing in the text, and only limited information from the social practices of the time, to suggest that any of these interpretations were intended either by Jesus or by the Gospel writers who recorded this story.

In any event, when the story has been told, and the point has been underlined, Jesus finishes with a familiar adage: “*You cannot serve God and wealth.*” [Luke 16:13b] (You may recall this from the King James Version as “You cannot serve God and mammon,” which has a little more literary heft to it). However it is stated, however, the sentence is easily *misunderstood*. Jesus did not say “You cannot serve God and have money,” nor “You cannot serve God and save money,” nor even “You cannot serve God and waste money.” The key word in this phrase is “serving.”

To serve wealth is to give it enormous power in your life: it becomes the measure of your success, the indication of your security or social position, the goal towards which you strive. And we would be wise to be careful in being too complacent about claiming that we do not serve mammon: not a day passes that we are not invited into serving wealth. Sometimes it is the power of economic *necessity*: when money for essentials is in short supply, we make choices that are fueled by our need. More often for most of us here, it is the power of economic *security and stability*: we want to plan college funds for our children, amass retirement funds for ourselves, perhaps even allocate estate funds for those we will leave behind. None of these are ignoble or unfaithful goals in themselves, but they have a dangerous tendency to seduce us into paying more attention to the funds themselves than to the good uses we have in mind for them. And when that happens, we have fallen into “serving wealth.”

A church member came to see me once, when I was serving the church in Washington state, with a concern about an upcoming real estate transaction. He and his family were planning to move to a bigger and more comfortable home, and he came to me because he felt somehow that it was not morally right for them to do that. I am afraid that I did not give this person very good counsel. After asking some questions about his family’s situation and the details of how the decision was made to buy the new home, I did my best to reassure him that what he was doing was not a problem. After all, I glibly said, it is not money that is the root of evil, but the love of money.

What I missed, I realize in retrospect, is that the man knew intuitively what I did not hear in his words that afternoon: that somehow the purchase of this home made him feel as though he was serving wealth instead of serving God. I do believe that he may have been too hard on himself: my observation as his pastor was that he was not captive to his wallet. Still, I wish I had acknowledged his dilemma more theologically and helpfully.

The truth is that money and finance are not only spiritual disciplines, they are difficult spiritual disciplines. When we try to prayerfully discern how God is calling us to manage our fiscal resources, we have to sort out a daunting set of feelings and expectations. We learn attitudes about money as we grow up: spending, saving,

borrowing, and giving it away. We are urged on every side by a competitive marketplace to spend more, and we are asked on every side by charitable organizations and by peace and justice groups to give more. We have responsibilities for children and other family members, and we often take on additional responsibilities for homes, land, animals, and precious possessions.

In this context, following the practices of discernment -- of listening for God's guidance in our choices and decisions -- can be especially demanding. Faithful discernment requires that we set aside our own preferences and prejudices, and instead ask hard and revealing questions of ourselves and our situation. Discernment also requires that we be genuinely willing to accept whatever guidance might come to us -- including the call to change, forebear, or sacrifice.

Amid all of this complexity, the instructions from Jesus are very simple: be faithful in little, so that you will be faithful in much. Practice managing what you have with love and compassion. There are not separate rules or commandments for managing finances (though several authors and religious organizations present programs that seem to say that there are). No, the values that inform faithful management of money are just the familiar Christian values: peace, justice, mercy, healing, reconciliation, love. Money management is just one more way that we live what we believe. And more profoundly, money management is a form of the spiritual discipline of stewardship -- of responsibly caring for, using, and preserving the gifts of God.

I suppose I am fortunate in that my dad's advice has never really been challenged -- which is to say, no one has ever offered me a way to steal or cheat that was worth a million dollars. But the discipline of that saying is one of his precious legacies to me. Though he was by no means a religious man, he testified to the truth of Jesus' words: "*Whoever is faithful in very little is faithful also in much.*"

Amen.

Prayer for September 23, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

God of all our human ages, we offer prayers this morning for the youth in our midst.

We thank you for their presence in our lives and in our church. We cherish their energies, their enthusiasms, their idealism, and their curiosity; we are grateful for the ways in which they challenge our habits and ideas. Give us grace to receive these gifts even when we are in a hurry or annoyed, even when our points of view are clashing.

Mindful of the dangers of our time, we pray for the safety of our young people. We worry about the risky choices that they sometimes make, and about the consequences that seem so clear to elders but so remote to youth. Guide them, we pray, into choices that will open opportunities rather than close them, and help them to learn the lessons that harsh consequences are sometimes necessary to teach.

We also bring before you our hopes for their learning – that they may become savvy and world-wise without losing their hopes and dreams. Give them patience to learn the things that seem useless now, but will serve them well in the future. And give them energy to master the facts and skills that do capture their imaginations, so that they can follow their ideas with clarity and purpose.

Give to them, we pray, times of joy and laughter; teach them to see the oddities and idiosyncrasies of life and to find humor there. Give them a sense of lightness about the world, and a sense of light about your presence with them.

We come to you as people of all ages, and ask that you shine in each of our lives. Give us the grace to appreciate and honor the gifts of each stage of our lives – the ones we have now, the ones that are past, and the ones that are still ahead of us. Keep us mindful of your grace, which knows every age and favors all of them.

All this we ask in the name of the One who calls us to faithfulness in every age and season, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us.