

**The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa**

Sermon for September 23

Proper 20C

Amos 8:4-7

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Luke 16:1-13

I wonder how long it has been since I went a whole day without once thinking about money. I wonder when the last time was that I went a whole 24 hours without commenting about how much something cost, or how little money I had. I wonder when was the last time I went to the mail and there was not some piece of junk advertising a sale or great deal on a credit card, or a mortgage or asking me for a donation. I wonder the last time I watched the news, and there was no reference to money, the stock market, the price of oil, state budgets, or team payrolls.

The more I wondered about the last time I went a whole day without thinking about money, the clearer it became that it has been a long long long time. Could it be that there has not been such a day in years...well, decades. Who knows maybe its been 50 years. Maybe I cannot remember a day, because maybe there has not been a day since infancy that I have not thought of money.

I wonder how long it takes each day before we hear something related to money. When I listen to the early morning news chances are better than average that money is mentioned. Check yourself this week, and see how quickly in each day, how early in each morning thoughts concerning money come into your mind.

Maybe if I began each morning in prayer instead of turning on the morning news, I could avoid thinking about money for a little bit longer. Maybe, but I doubt it. The scriptures are filled with references to and stories about money and wealth. I did a word check on "oremus", a bible browsing website. Here is what I found. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (regarded by most to be the most accurate translation of the Scripture) the word "wealth" is found 127 times in the Bible, "riches", 84 times, "silver", 366 times, "gold" 544, "money" 186 times. Just, for a comparison, I did a word check on some other words ---"sex" is found 20 times, "adultery" 43 times, "lust" 56, "fornication" 26 times. And, when I did a word count for "homosexuality", I found it came up zero times. **I was even stunned by this.** Now that does not mean of course that the concept of homosexuality is not in the scripture...there are some passages that refer to it. But, as far as the word, it is not there. It is clear to me that for the scripture; money, wealth and riches are much more central than is any thing related to sexuality.

Money and wealth are certainly central in our readings this weekend.

The prophet Amos speaks words of harsh judgment from the Lord to the people of Israel. The Lord judges Israel because they trample the needy and bring to ruin the poor. They fix the scales when it comes to selling grain, and they mix in the sweepings from the floor to sell with their wheat. They spend the Sabbath, the day dedicated to the Lord impatiently waiting for it to end so they can get back to their financial scheming. For them, the Sabbath is day of inconvenience, because it gets in the way of their profits.

The Gospel of Luke this weekend is about a wily, clever, and shrewd manager. Commentators and preachers love to debate this parable. Was the manager dishonest or incompetent? Did he steal from the owner or just mismanage the owners wealth? When he cuts the amount creditors owed in half, was he giving up the masters money or only his own commission? I have to confess that discussions of questions like these leave me a bit bored. These may be interesting debates, but I really think they miss the point.

The climax and main point of today's Gospel is the last sentence. You cannot serve God and wealth. I believe that this is why the scripture speaks more about money than it does about sex. Money is God's chief rival. Money is the false god most likely to seduce us and draw us away from the Lord. And as it is with every false god money is the false god most likely to kill us. Think again of the news that fills our news broadcasts and papers. Isn't 90 % of it about money ...bank robberies, drug busts, budget battles, oil prices, foreclosures,

recessions. Think of your own family and friends and the many squabbles that are over money? What percentage of marriages break up because of something related to money? How many family squabbles are about money. How much of your worry is about money??? How many nights do you like awake because of stress and anxiety related to money. When money becomes a god, it kills.

You cannot serve God and Money.  
We sure are tempted to try.

Even Churches are tempted to try. We seek to be faithful in proclaiming the Gospel, but we also want to keep the doors open, and the lights on. Preachers are sometimes tempted to preach about controversial issues in a way that might not offend the people who pay their salary. Preachers might avoid speaking on issues related to poverty, immigration, war, environmental concerns, the cars we drive, the homes we live in, the vacations we go on, our style of life so as to shield ourselves from the Gospel truth and not to offend the people who give generously to the church. Sometimes preachers compromise the Word of God out of their own financial concerns. Preachers are sometimes tempted, and ....sometimes they give in to that temptation. Sometimes so have I.

Jesus is clear. You cannot serve God and wealth.

How do we avoid being seduced by money? How can we avoid making a god of wealth.  
I think the Gospel story gives us a clue.

The wily manager writes off a portion of the debts of those who owed. He used wealth to make friends, so that they would welcome him to the eternal homes.

I believe that Jesus is telling us, that the way to avoid wealth's seduction is to give it away. When we give our money away, it loses its control over us. Now friends, I am not, I really am not trying to tell you to give the church your money so you can be free from its power over you. No, what I am wondering is not how we can give more to the Church, but, rather how we as a church can give more of our money away.

Do you know that there are churches, smaller and poorer than we who build hospitals in The Sudan, churches in Liberia, entire homes in Grand Rapids and along the Gulf Coast, schools in Central America, AIDS orphanages in Africa. They have fund raisers not to raise money for themselves, but for others. Why couldn't we do that? Churches of all denominations are being asked to consider giving .7% of their money to achieve the millennium development goals of fighting the causes of poverty around the world. Why couldn't we do that?

We can, of course we can, and when we do, we will be acting to loosen the death grip wealth can have on our soul.

Its been a long long time since I went a whole day without thinking about money. Years, decades, probably close to a half century in fact. My hunch is that not much will change in the remaining years of my life. I will probably stop thinking about money, when I stop thinking at all.

In the meantime, as long as I am thinking about money, I think I will pray about it also.  
I pray that we in the Church may be as passionate in our discussion about money as we are about sex. I pray that preachers may have the courage to seek and speak the truth about money. I pray that we might begin to think more shrewdly about giving money away, than we do about protecting it. I pray that we may become more committed to using money with an eye not on earthly dividends that pass away, but heavenly rewards that endure eternally.

I pray that we may become more clever in using wealth in ways that do not defraud or cheat the poor whom God loves. Instead may we use wealth to care for the poor, and in caring for the poor, may we give to God that glory praise and honor which God alone deserves.