

### **Problem: Does wealth separate us from the mission of God?**

-As most of you all know, Abby and I bought a house this past week. I still can't believe it. I was mowing the yard and doing some little projects this past weekend and still had to stop, stare, and wonder: is this really real? Buying a house is something that is at many points ridiculously complicated: proof of employment, bank account information, receipts for what seem to be every little moment in your entire life. The mortgage company wants to see it all. Then, you look through the closing documents before you get the keys and all of these little line item credits and deductions. I remember thinking, does someone just make this stuff up, put a couple of long financial terms on a line, do some math and call it good? Infact, Abby and I were probably a little bit more exploratory than most other first-time home buyers and sat on the phone with our banker to try to understand some of the credits and deductions. We found one called a "simultaneous issue credit" where there was a huge pause on the other side of the phone with finally a response: "I have no idea what that is, that's an item that the Title Company gives you. You will have to talk with them". Even the bank doesn't know all of the terms!

-This entire process has really underlined the fact for me how buying a house can separate the "haves" from the "have nots" in our economy. In order to complete a process like this, you have to have the education, the wherewithal, and the initial wealth in order to get your way through the maze of financial demands. Owning a home also, if done right in today's market, can increase your personal wealth and allows you access to other things which are not possible if you are not able to own one.

-It's interesting in having completed this months long financial process and reading our gospel text today: "You cannot have two masters. You cannot serve wealth and God." Again, very forceful words from Jesus. So, have Abby and I just made a big mistake? Is the wealth of this house (and most of us) separating us from God's mission?

**Solution: Not necessarily. Even dishonest wealth can be used as a tool to bring relationship, value, and God's mission.**

-To be completely honest with you, this is probably my least favorite parable in the entire New Testament. Like all of the line items in our home closing documents, the parable of the shrewd steward is complex and even contradictory. Most respected contemporary biblical commentators that I have read seem to all throw up their hands in some form and indicate the weirdness of this story.

-The parable that immediately precedes this one in the Gospel of Luke is ironically the parable of the Prodigal (or wasteful) Son. Infact, the same word is used to describe the steward ("thiakorpizo") which literally means wasteful. So you might think this is another story of repentance and forgiveness, but no. The rich master seems to only care about the bottom line and fires (not forgives) the wasteful steward who seems only to reduce a debt to save his own behind (not repent). There is no real character to like in this story.

-Or maybe, coming at it a different way, we can see how the steward was reducing this debt to yes, save face, but most of all (we'll give him the benefit of the doubt) to create relationship with the owners. He's cutting debt in order to reach out to people right? Relationship over wealth, that sounds like something Christ would want to emphasize. Accept this interpretation breaks down too in verse 8 when the rich master "commended the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly". Well that's not really that great...what gives?

-So what do we do with this text? The only way I can figure out how to interpret this story is from a theme that the Gospel of Luke uses quite a bit: "how much more." How much more does God love you than the birds of air? How much more does God have for you than you can ever store up in some barn somewhere? If even a dishonest, conniving, greedy manager can reduce a debt and cause relief for the poor, then how much more can we do? If even a manipulative manager who in many other ways we would judge harshly for his seedy actions, can create relationship (relationship that is not entirely wholesome, but is still relationship), then how much more can we, the children of light, do in the name of God? How much more good, love, and justice can we create with wealth?

-This is the question and challenge, my friends, that I think in a little bit of a round-a-bout way this parable poses for us. What more can we do with wealth? Maybe another way of putting it is: what is our purpose? What are we willing to do with the gifts that have been entrusted to us for a greater purpose?

**Implication: How do we see wealth as a tool and not as a god?**

-For a long time, this church was in what I like to call "survival mode". Many of you still remember it: the heating bills posted on the bulletin board for people to take home and pay, the reworking of a boiler that was on it's last legs but had to keep working because there was no money to replace it, the purchasing of bread and wine as well as communion supplies sparingly because it wasn't clear whether there would be enough to get through the entire year. Our Savior's Lutheran has lived through some rocky moments.

-But here is the good news: we are not in "survival mode" anymore. Our church can pay our bills and our pastor. We can afford to do some more expensive projects like paint the church and pave the parking lot because funds are available to do so. We are in a blessed place right now and for that we must give thanks to God.

-Not being in "survival mode" anymore allows us the opportunity to as a church think more deeply about how to use the gifts that we have. Instead of "eeking" out the meager leftovers of the church budget and giving it generally to the MT Synod or some mainstay global ministry partner, maybe it's time for us to ask the question: "how much more good can we do." How much more good can we do for our community's children then in focusing on being a substantive partner with Bonner School and offering tutoring,

supervision, meals, and a safe/fun space to be? How much more good can we do to address our community's desire for identity than focusing on organizing a farmer's market in our parking lot, having a pre-school in our parsonage, or being a center for people in our area to come and receive simple health and dental care.

-Oh, there goes the pastor again rattling off big ideas. Accept, they are not my ideas. They are *your* ideas that were simply recorded and organized at the three discernment potlucks this past month.

-This is how we get focus and purpose. By talking and discerning, praying and deliberating. It is in the process of finding our church's purpose and a little bit more focus that we can use wealth as a tool of abundance, not of scarcity.

-It's very clear from this parable that Jesus was not about simply gathering wealth for wealth's sake. Wealth should be seen as a tool, as a gift meant to be shared and to benefit many through purpose. How much more good can Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Bonner do than this shrewd steward. I think quite a bit more. I guess it's time to find out! Thanks be to God. Amen.