

“Called to be Managers”
Waterford Mennonite Church
February 23, 2014
Matthew 25:14-30

Focus: To challenge the congregation to serve as managers of their finances/possessions by keeping in view how we think of our money/possessions and how we treat them (To inspire a greater desire to live with open hands as to not clutch our finances/possession which have come from God and belong to God).

This morning we continue in our series of Putting God first with our finances. Pastor Neil started this part of the series by reminding us that all belongs to God. Last week Pastor Lyle shared stories from men in our congregation, as he challenged us to see the ways that giving is an act of worship. Next week, Pastor Lyle will speak on how giving is a spiritual practice. This morning then we turn to the topic of how we as followers of Jesus are called to be managers of our money and possessions.

One who is functioning as a good manager will display that one is able to manage one's money and possessions without one's money and possessions managing him/her. I would go on to assert that such good management happens when we are able to keep honestly reflecting on if we are viewing our money and possessions with the light of Christ. Furthermore, as we are able to view our money and possessions with the light of Christ I believe when it comes to our money and possessions we will be moved to living with open hands.

First though we turn to our text for this morning which is from Matthew chapter twenty-five. Our text for this morning is a very familiar parable, often referred to as the parable of the talents. I thought it was interesting to read Stanley Hauerwas' thoughts on this parable as he writes that “No parable has been more misused than Jesus' parable of the talents. Once any parable is abstracted from Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, once any parable is divorced from its apocalyptic context, misreading is inevitable” (Stanley Hauerwas, Brazos Theological Commentary of the Bible: Matthew (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press2006), 209).

Hauerwas' quote alludes to the context of this parable, a context that we need to keep in mind as we consider the parable.

I would invite you to turn with me to Matthew chapter twenty-four as we seek to understand the context of this familiar parable. In verse one we find Jesus just outside the temple in Jerusalem. Matthew goes on to share that Jesus is approached by his disciples and they ask him: "Tell us, when will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus' answers to those questions are then captured in the rest of chapter twenty-four and all of chapter twenty-five. Therefore, our text for today is part of Jesus' answer to the questions asked by the disciples. This means then that our text is categorized an apocalyptic text, one that addresses concerns related to eschatology or the end times. In the New Testament much of the apocalyptic thought is connected with the forecasts of Jesus' return (Stephen L. Harris ed., *Understanding the Bible* (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), 285). Now whether any or all of that made sense to you, what is important to grasp is that the parable, commonly called the parable of the talents, is part of a larger section which consists of Jesus' answers when asked about the end times and his return.

Looking now specifically at chapter twenty-five we can easily note that chapter twenty-five is divided into three shorter passages. The first is the parable of the ten virgins. The second is the parable of the bags of gold or also called the parable of the talents. And the last section is the separation of the sheep and goats. Our specific passage begins in verse fourteen and I would draw your attention to the first word which in the Today's New International Version is "again." So, we need to figure out what does "again" refer to? Well if we go back up to verse one of chapter twenty-five we read Jesus' words that "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like..." So Matthew's employing the word "again" is letting us know that Jesus is offering

another take on what the kingdom of heaven will look like. This time though he places the illustration in the realm of finances and banking, and by doing so Jesus communicates that these areas of our lives matter.

A man is going on a journey and so he calls together his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To the first servant he gave five bags of gold. To the second servant he gave two bags of gold. And to the final servant he gave one bag of gold. I remember reading this passage as a child and teenager and getting hung up on the fact that there was not equality in this story! So, if the master had six bags of gold then why wouldn't he have just given each of the servants two bags?! Perhaps you can read into that my sense of fairness and equality in a family of four children? However, allowing ourselves to get hung up on that question leads us away from the point and purpose of the parable as Jesus has shared it.

Perhaps your bible, like mine, will tell you that one bag of gold or one talent is worth about twenty years of a day laborers wage. Twenty. Years. Suddenly then we must recognize that the one who only received one bag of gold was still entrusted with a HUGE amount of money! I think that often the church has worked hard to over symbolize what the talents could be and so we talk about our gifts and abilities. These practices have led us to shying away from exploring how this parable could speak into how we handle the money and possessions we have been entrusted with. The reality is friends that in 2014 most of us are not really excited at the prospect of allowing let alone inviting someone else to tell us how we should handle and view our money and possessions. And yet here is Jesus doing exactly that. Not only is he speaking of money and possessions but he is sharing how it will be in the kingdom of Christ's followers.

Well the text continues to describe how these three servants handled the financial gifts that were entrusted to them. The first two went at once and put their money to work and gained

additional bags of gold. The one though who only received one bag of gold dug a hole in the ground and hid their master's money. In verse nineteen we are told that after a long time the master returned and settled accounts with them. For the first two servants they presented to the master what they had done with the master's money. In both instances the master says "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21; 23). However the last servant said that he was afraid so he dug a hole and placed the gold in the ground. The master who had been very generous was not pleased by this information and here we see how this parable is considered a parable of judgment. The master said "Take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For those who have will be given more, and they will have an abundance. As for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 25:28-30). Friends no matter how we try to paint the picture one way or another, no matter what we try to substitute bags of gold for, the underlying message is clear: it matters what we do with that which we have been entrusted to.

So what does this text have to say to us as we consider putting God first with our money and our call to be managers of our money and possessions? First it goes back to the message of Neil's sermon two weeks ago. All that we have is from God and is God's. We are God's. "Dude, he brought the pie!" I would project that the three servants had different understandings and perspectives of the same master. Stanley Hauerwas reflects that "The slave with one talent feared losing what he had been given, with the result that he tried to turn the gift into a possession. In contrast, the first two slaves recognized that to try to secure the gifts they had been given means that the gifts would be lost. The joy... which the master invites his slaves that

had not tried to protect what they had been given is the joy that comes from learning to receive a gift without regret” (Stanley Hauerwas, Matthew, 210). So once we can keep in mind that all things are from God and are God’s, we then move to the task of managing money and possessions instead of allowing them to control us.

As we keep perspective and remind ourselves that all we have is from God and is God we also must fight against our culture and the pressure from outside that we clearly always need more to be happy. You only need to turn on your tv, radio, computer, or open a magazine, or see a billboard to hear of one more thing you just need that would help make your life easier, happier, more fulfilled. I wonder if anyone would like to take a guess at what is the total current consumer debt in America? Anyone want to guess? If you guessed \$11.5 trillion you would be correct. This week I heard on a report on the NPR that the Federal Reserve Bank of New York released a new report that stated that the consumer debt held by American households has reached \$11.5 trillion. I do not see this as an accomplishment that should be celebrated. Depressing to me was that out of that \$11.5 trillion, \$857 billion is in credit card debt. As followers of Jesus we are to recognize that all we have is from God and is God. We are to manage that which we have been given and one critical way to do so is to live within our means. This means though that we will have to actively fight against the full and temptation of consumerism which will tell us time and time again that we need just one more thing, or the newest toy or piece of technology. It means that we will live simply so that others may simply live.

As we fight against the pull of consumerism, which I would argue is present at with us all regardless of our ages, we must also fight against the temptation that how we are doing financially is only determined by comparing ourselves to everyone else. How do you know if

you drive a nice enough car? You look at others. How do you know if your house is big enough? You look at others? How do you know if your saving account is large enough? You guess how much others have. This is not a new problem. This week I read a quote from Saint Augustine who died in the year 430. Augustine wrote “Men (Humans) would not be lovers of money unless they thought that their excellence depended on their wealth” (Mark Vincent, *A Christian View of Money: Celebrating God’s Generosity*, (Scottsdale, Penn: Herald Press, 1997), 15).

You might recall my sermon from a month ago when I spoke on our fears of scarcity related to our hesitations with embracing the gift of Sabbath time. Well our fears of scarcity are also present when it comes to how we think of our money and our possessions. I believe that we think that if only we could clutch our money and our possessions a little tighter than surely that will prevent them from suddenly slipping through our fingers. The fears of scarcity also prevent us from being generous with our money with those who need money today because *what if* we might need that money tomorrow, next year, next decade? What if one day there will not be enough for me?

So first is the reminder that all we have is from God and is God. Secondly we strive to see our money and possession in the light of Christ which means that we will fight against consumerism and the temptation to determine our financial security or success by always comparing ourselves to others. And finally as we live into abundant life with managing that which God has given to us, we are called and invited to live life with hands open. Hands that welcome the chance to be generous. Hands that seek out ways to share with others. Hands that do not clutch or protect that which we have been given. Hands that think of the other, whether that is a the other we know or the other we do not know by name.

This morning I want to offer a couple suggestions for ways we do and ways we could hold all of these thoughts together in tangible practices within the body of faith at Waterford Mennonite. Last week Pastor Lyle spoke of giving our first fruits back to God. We often first think of that with presenting our weekly offerings and tithes. In my ministry as pastor of community life I work with our Sharing Fund. This fund is created to help those in our congregation who have a financial need. I believe we also live with open hands when we freely contribute to the financial needs of others in our midst through giving to the sharing fund. As we give to the sharing fund we release control of our money and also communicate our understanding that the money was always God's to begin with. We give anonymously and the money is distributed with only a very few knowing who is receiving the gift. Much has been said, and more will be said next week, on the topic of money. I wonder though, how do we live with open hands with our possessions?

The Creation Care Ministry Team has been exploring ways to invite the congregation to create a system where we could share our possessions with each other. I do not mean that we would become a large commune. Instead there would be a structure in place where we could let the congregation know what items we have that could be borrowed. So what might be included in such a list? Possessions could be included such as hand drills, to kitchen mixers, to pressure canners, to a corn hole game, to cabin in the woods, to a card table, to a garden tiller, to crutches, to a tent, to a wii game, to a snow blower, to a truck for hauling loads around town, to a punch bowl, to a stroller, to children's clothes, to... the sky is the limit! The premise is to hold our possessions lightly and to recognize that we each do not need to personally own everything when we are able to share with and borrow from each other. Creation Care Ministry Team is exploring a website that would help facilitate such borrowing which would reduce the administrative time

involved with managing our sharing. So be sure to keep your eyes open for the opportunity to join in the opportunity of sharing our possessions.

These are just a couple tangible ideas of how to live out and live into this sermon. I encourage you to think of other ideas and share them with others. Upholding these beliefs and practices is clinging to the promise that is stated throughout scripture: The Lord will provide. It is moving from not frantically clutching that which we already possess, whether it be money or possessions, or frantically trying to get more money of possession within our clutches. Instead it is living with hands open, loosely holding the money and possessions within our care that Christ has invited us to be managers of. It is with this faith that we pray “give us Lord our daily bread”. It is with this faith that we sing “the shepherd will supply my need”.

This morning I am going to invite you to simply listen to our song of response. The lyrics of this song were written by John Newton who lived from 1725 to 1807. Perhaps the name John Newton is familiar as he is also the one who also wrote the lyrics of “Amazing Grace.” Newton entitled our song of response “Though Troubles Assail Us.”

Although Newton was quite prolific in writing hymns I was not familiar with this song until a dear friend introduced it to me, Marg Fisher. You see this is Marg’s life song, a song that she uses to keep her grounded as a follower of Jesus. I first heard this song in December when I met with Jim and Marg to work on tentative funeral plans, knowing already then that cancer was present and threatening the dreams of her future with Jim, with her children, with her grandchildren, and with us. So on that Monday morning the three of gathered around her stereo to listen to this song, and together we worshiped God. We worshiped the God who gives us all things and invites us to serve as managers. We worshiped the God to whom all things and all ones belong.

During Jim and Marg's journey I have found myself listening to this song time and time again. Not only does this song clearly articulate the depth of Marg's faith, even in the face of death, it has also challenged me to keep my faith where it should be - in God alone. It also has challenged me to cling to this pivotal truth - all we have is from God, and is God's...our money, our possessions, and yes, even our very lives. May we join with John Newton, and with dear Marg, in proclaiming our trust in the Lord will provide.

May it be so.

Confidence

Though troubles assail,
And dangers affright,
Though friends should all fail
And foes all unite;
Yet one thing secures us
Whatever betide,
The scripture assures us,
"The Lord will provide."

The birds without barn
Or storehouse are fed,
From them let us learn
To trust for our bread:
His saints, what is fitting
Shall ne'er be denied
So long as 'tis written,
"The Lord will provide."

When Satan appears
To stop up our path,
And fills us with fears,
We triumph by faith;
He cannot take from us
Though oft he has tried
The heart cheering promise,
"The Lord will provide."

When Life sinks apace
And death is in view,
The word of his grace
Shall comfort us through
No fearing or doubting
With Christ on our side,
We hope to die shouting,
"The Lord will provide."

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