

Pentecost 16 C

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There's really no getting around the fact that the Gospel is kind of harsh today. Just a few weeks ago, we were blessed with an image of Jesus going out into the wilds to find the one sheep who was lost and to bring them back to the safety and comfort of the flock. But in today's reading, Jesus is a bit more "you made your bed, now lie in it for eternity." And this isn't the only place of tension in our scriptures today. The Gospel writer seems to think that if you are a person with a lot of money, you will be corrupted so much that you will ignore the poor and be punished by God forever. But the writer of 1 Timothy sees things a little differently. That writer seems to think that if you are in the fortunate position of having great wealth, you need to be on guard against corruption, but it isn't a foregone conclusion that you will turn into a jerk.

All of which tells me that the early church had the same kind of ambivalence about wealth that we do. And it tells me that they were having the same kind of argument about the nature of money that we have now. And, of course, as is the case with all good arguments that last 2,000 years, we all happen to think that we're right.

The one camp of Christians would say that you don't need two coats, and you certainly don't need two houses. They would look at today's Gospel story and remind us that there is an insidious evil in the accumulation of wealth that corrupts and destroys the people of God, while it also creates the kind of inequality that is the root cause of the evils in every society that has ever existed.

The other camp of Christians would say that there is more nuance to the discussion of money. They would point to the ministry of Lydia in the book of Acts—a wealthy woman who gave generously to the mission of St. Paul, without whom he could not have planted churches in Rome, Corinth, Phillipi, or Ephesus. They would point to the Empress Helena, who used her wealth and influence to found monasteries and holy sites all across the ancient near east—paths of pilgrimage, many of which exist to this day, that have ennobled the faith of countless generations. They would look at the cathedrals of Europe, built with the funds of princes and kings for the teaching of the faith and the praise of God.

And these two camps have been at odds. Is money a catalyst of corruption for the human soul? Or is it a tool that we need to be wary of because it can keep us from our faith if we're not careful? Everyone seems to agree that it comes with pitfalls, but the early church doesn't seem to agree on HOW dangerous it is.

So, where does that leave us this morning? We are modern people with modern sensibilities about wealth. Do we even resonate with these ancient arguments. And, more to the point on a morning when we baptize, what does this have to do with the children that we welcome into the faith?

I actually think it has a lot to do with our faith. At a baptism service, we ask the parents and the godparents to publicly promise to raise their children in the faith. And the faith we practice isn't an abstraction. It isn't an hour on a Sunday morning. The faith that we proclaim week after week is a call to live life in a certain way—a way that is in line with the hopes and dreams of God.

And, for most of us, money is a big part of our lives. The acquiring of it. The spending of it. The envy of it. The lack of it. I think many of us can spend a lot of time with money on the brain.

I've learned two religious lessons about money in my life, and I wonder if they may be helpful to us as we think about the connection between money and faith. The first one I learned when I was about five years old. I think I must have gotten a weekly allowance for chores or something like that, when I received my four quarters—you parents will have to explain what quarters are to your kids—I was taught to put one of them in a little teapot that we then would bring to church. I can't say that I fully understood what I was being taught at the time, but I do

remember that I knew that my money was somehow being given to the baby Jesus and maybe to some poor children somewhere. I am also unclear why it was a teapot, but listen, the message came through all the same. I was being taught to be generous from a really young age, and I think that was a good example of what parents teach to children as they are raised in the faith.

The second lesson I learned about faith and money was a decidedly more adult lesson. I learned that organized money is power. And that one of the things I can do as a pastor is to help people organize their money to make change in the world. I cannot make much of a dent in the problem of hunger in this world with \$20. But with \$10,000? With \$100,000? Now we are starting to talk about change and impact. And one of the things I can do with my faith is to help organize that kind of money to help the world look a little bit more like it should. So, in my adult faith, I see money as a tool and one of the ways that I can respond to God's call.

These are the two main lessons I have learned about faith and money. Maybe you have learned others—I'd love to hear them. But what I take from the scriptures today is that our ancestors were wary about the ways that money can corrupt, and I think they were right to be on guard. It would behoove us to be likewise vigilant. And, when we promise to raise children in the faith, we can't leave out the lessons that the scriptures and the church teach about our relationship

with money. We are raising these children to be wise and faithful, and if we are going to preach that to them, we should probably practice it ourselves. Amen.