Text: Luke 16:1-15

**Introduction**

Ok, I wish the two services today were flip-flopped. Preaching even tangentially on money, before one is actually installed, seems like a risky thing.

Of course, I suppose I could have picked up the Epistle lesson on man and woman in the church. [Pause]

So, there are some practicalities that need to be addressed first. And then I hope to explore the gospel in a bit deeper way.

The simple practicalities are as our Treasurer puts it in the announcements. “Regular giving will be most helpful in maintaining the balance of our reserve funds.” Regular giving according to the law and tradition is called a tithe. God works through means, and the means of running the church and its missions are placed in your accounts. Which opens up to you the gospel opportunity to support the Work of God in this world in a joyful and willing manner by bringing the tithes in..

I start with that simple practicality because the next step to fix tithing problems is usually the idea of fundraising. And there are many good things that can be said about fundraising. It builds a sense of shared ownership in the endeavor. It usually builds camaraderie and fellow feeling and the ability to come together to do something. But one thing fundraising usually doesn’t do? Actually raise funds. At least something beyond those once in a blue moon type expenditures.

The practical reality is that if the response to the gospel doesn’t support its work, nothing – not the demands of the law, not the shrewd workarounds – will.

**Trouble in the World**

Ok, that simple practicality behind, let’s reflect on the gospel lesson.

The question that I believe Jesus’ strangest parable addresses is “how do we live richer and more rewarding lives?” And I’m not going to start preaching a prosperity gospel here. There are plenty of health and wealth preachers working who will do that if you want to hear that. But for that matter, that is simply the message of the world – or as Jesus would say “mammon.’

I’m pulling from writer Liel Liebovitz here, but the basic facts are widely available. 38% of Americans 25-54 have chosen to go through life unpartnered. The marriage rate – weddings per 1000 people – was just under 10 in 1990. It declined to roughly 7 in 2009 where is seemed to stabilize. Until 2016. From 2016 to 2021 it declined from 7 per 1000 to 5 per 1000 with no sign of stopping its decline. What would have been the unanimous report of all places and cultures about the most important element of a rich and rewarding life – a solid marriage – is something that Americans are disposing of in pursuit of other things.

Lack of marriage flows on down to the current number of kids per woman – 1.64. We hate our lives so much that we won’t even replace ourselves. Yet this is the advice of the world. Freeze your eggs and lean in to that career. And directed at men, what used to be the highest compliment – Father – is now something disdained from every direction.

Average life expectancy having risen since the industrial revolution, even through the wars of the 20th century and the early environmental pollution, has fallen recently to 76.6 years. Opioid deaths and simply deaths of despair. And of course that number doesn’t include the effect of the abortion toll.

American culture, reflected in actual behavior which the numbers capture, as compared to its marketing material, is a death cult. It is nasty, lonely, brutish and short. And the more you choose it, we know in our guts the worse it gets. We know that the marketing dream of the sexual revolution combined with have it all now materialism is empty. That it takes non-stop propaganda for the glories of “progress” just to keep us distracted from its ugly reality - that everything around us that it touches is broken. And the harder truth is that beyond empty it spiritually impoverishes us. Our very ability to see and admit it is dulled. And a rich and rewarding life is a spiritual life.

**Trouble in the Text**

The manager, in the KJV version the steward, is the most modern character in the bible. He is living the American dream. He has dedicated himself to the accumulation of goods and power. So much that he has been left in complete control of his master’s possessions.

But the trouble with all of the power and possessions that he’s accumulated control over is that they can be taken away. There is a day when even this manager must give an account of what he did with it all.

And it is staring at the fact of giving an account that the manager stumbles upon a few truths.

First, “I’m not strong enough to dig.” Can I ever by my own strength make the dream of money and power fulfilling? Can I ever work hard enough? And the honest answer is no.

Second, “I’m ashamed to beg.” Grace is humiliating to one accustomed to earning it, or at least thinking it is all earned. And the longer we believe the world’s propaganda, the longer we think we’ve earned it.

But I think there is a third truth that dawns on the manager. Everything that he’d been accumulating and hoarding. All those figures on the ledger: 100 measures of oil, 100 measures of wheat, were not the important things. “Being received into their houses” was much more important. Here we find those rich and meaningful lives.

It’s the crisis of the judgment that shakes the manager from his spiritual dullness. And what he thought all his life was the richer and more fulfilling existence as turned into a nightmare. “What is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.” It is the humility to accept grace, and the willingness to extend it, to receive and be received that God looks for.

**Gospel in the Text**

Jesus explains the parable in a series of aphorisms. Or that is how I take it.

The first connects this very worldly story to the eternal story. “I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.”

We are all in a situation like the manager. We have been given complete use of this life we are now living. The problem with this life is that there comes a time when we can no longer be the manager of it. The fact of the Day of Judgment should shake us free of our spiritual dullness. Are our backs string enough to dig ourselves out of the grave? Do we accept that we all beggars?

Jesus would tell the rich young man to sell everything he had and give it away and he’d have treasure in heaven. As Lutheran’s we tend to shy away from such language as potential works righteousness. But Jesus is always clear, the invitation comes first from God. We are all beggars. But what we have by grace can be used for eternal reasons. “Don’t lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in a steal, but lay up treasures in heaven.”

The wealth we have in this life and this life itself come from God, but it is ours to do with as we desire. Where is our heart? Do we build bigger barns for ourselves, or do we use it such that we might be welcomed into eternal dwellings. This wealth and this life are very little compared to the reality of God. But the one who is faithful in little is also faithful in much. How we use this life and everything we are given, points to how we would use real wealth. This life and everything in this world including all its wealth passes away, but the true life, the life of the world to come, is the eternal life.

God is going to give us that which is our own. We will have that resurrection body. The question is whose home are we received in?

**Gospel in the World**

Mammon, the world, money, is out there with a story about its dwelling. Get everything you can now. Your only security is in having more. Your only purpose is in accumulation and consuming. Self-gratification is the only good end. And by the way, you deserve it, baby. Do it your way.

God’s story is completely different. God knows you need the things of this world and he graciously provides all that we need to support this body and life. Your security is never found in this world which is passing away. Your security is only found under the Father’s wings. Deny yourself, pickup your cross and follow Christ. Your purpose is found not in self-actualization, but in denial of the sinful self and being conformed to the likeness of Christ.

How you treat money, the most immediate form of currency, is just the most immediate sign of which dwelling you wish to live in. More importantly, how do you invest this life? Whose dwelling are your living in? God’s household, or mammon’s? Only one is eternal.

“I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into eternal dwellings.” Amen.