

Dishonest Wealth

[Amos 8:4-7](#)

[Luke 16:1-13](#)

How many of you found this morning's gospel confusing? You're in good company – so do most New Testament scholars. I was trying to tell Jill about it and my first attempt was something like, “There was a manager or steward who was embezzling and when his employer asked for an audit he embezzled some more and his employer congratulated him.” It makes little sense as part of Jesus' teachings.

At the 8am service, Ed Valentine remarked that those having their debts reduced was like God's grace canceling our debts. I like the introduction of grace into this narrative and somehow it reminded me of Jacob who tricked his brother out of his birthright but God still liked him. Maybe this parable is a trickster story where God does something we don't expect.

So I'm just going to let it be, and if the Holy Spirit explains the parable to you, please come on up here and tell us all.

It was the last sentence of the parable that stuck with me this week, “I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” At first I thought, well I have no dishonest wealth so this doesn't apply to me. But then I started to think a bit more about wealth.

Wealth does not come from working hard and putting your savings under your mattress. Wealth comes from two places. Either from having an asset like land that appreciates in value because more people want it, or from the work of other people. When I put money into a retirement account it gets invested in mutual funds and it makes more money. I don't do anything, it just makes more money and that is wealth. But the money it is making doesn't come out of thin air, it comes from profits and profits are made by people. In a worker co-operative those profits

are used to grow the business and to compensate the workers who earned them. In most businesses, the profits are given not to the workers but to the investors.

In the 1970s it became generally accepted that the role of a company's management was to maximize shareholder wealth. That meant that the most important thing was to make profits which could be paid out to people who owned shares in the company, investors like the mutual funds that I have in my retirement account. And managers who did this well were compensated with profit-sharing deals. Over the fifty years since the maximization of shareholder wealth became the norm, chief executive officers' compensation has grown by 940% and CEOs now earn 351 times the average worker's pay. Yes, you heard me, 351 times the average worker's pay.¹

So not only am I getting money put into my retirement account on a regular basis but the management of the company is getting paid huge sums, and where is that money coming from? From the work of people who in some cases are getting paid very little and are struggling to put food on the table.

Jesus said, "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." Yes, I earned some of the money in my retirement account with my own labor, but much of it comes from the work of other people. It is money they earned through their hard work, but which gets paid to me. I think that's dishonest wealth.

And when I think about Creation it gets even worse. Until recently it was almost impossible to invest in mutual funds without investing in oil extraction or weapon manufacture. So not only were my investments making money on the back of other people's hard work but they were benefiting from and increasing global warming and international

¹ <https://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-pay-in-2020/>

conflict. My investments were making me wealthy while I did nothing but at what a cost. I think that's dishonest wealth.

Friends, even if you do not have a retirement account, you are implicated in this dishonest wealth because it is the very basis of our economic system. Our economy is based on making profits. If you receive Social Security or Disability, that money has been invested by the government and has earned interest. Some of it from activities that support the common good. Others not so much.

As Americans, dishonest wealth is part of who and what we are.

The system has its own life and it does exactly what Amos said in the first reading, it "tramples on the needy, and brings to ruin the poor of the land." And you don't need me to remind you that the poor of this land are often Black or indigenous people who have never earned enough to get a foot in the wealth creation system.

What does Jesus tell us to do about our dishonest wealth?

"I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

Actually, I really hope he didn't say that.

I hope he didn't say it because it seems so mercenary and transactional. So now I am to take my dishonest wealth and use it to make sure I get eternal real estate? That just seems like perpetuating the use of dishonest wealth to make my life better.

What I hope he meant is, while you are alive and can use your dishonest wealth, use it in a way that builds bridges and encourages reconciliation and peace; a way that furthers the realm of God, and the beloved community you build will welcome you into the next dimension. In Matthew we hear the familiar verse "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matt

6:21) Today's reading is similar but Jesus is saying, "Where your friends are, there will your heart be also" so use the dishonest wealth you have to build community and further the flourishing of all creation.

To me, that makes sense with the rest of the reading:

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

You cannot serve God and wealth.

Maximizing shareholder profit is serving wealth. Because to maximize shareholder wealth you reduce costs as far as possible which means paying your workers as little as you can, and using the earth's resources with no regard to future generations. Hundreds and thousands of miles of virgin forest in places like Bolivia and Brazil have been cut down to grow soy beans to feed cows and pigs so that we can have inexpensive hamburgers.² I cannot believe that this is serving *God* as it ultimately increases global warming and reduces the flourishing of all beings on this planet. It is serving *wealth*.

Two weeks ago, Don Maruska pointed out that we are using the earth's resources at an unsustainable rate. I wonder whether it is a coincidence that this really took off in the 1970s, the same time as maximizing shareholder wealth became a guiding principle. According to the United Nations, since 1970 resource extraction has more than tripled, and fossil fuel use has increased by 45%.³ Our dishonest wealth is stripping the planet of its resources at an unsustainable rate.

² <https://www.lifegate.com/forest-amazon-burger-king>

³ <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/were-gobbling-earths-resources-unsustainable-rate>

So my friends, the question is, what do we do? How do we, as disciples of Jesus, follow this difficult teaching. If we cannot serve both God and wealth, which will we choose?

Sitting here in church it seems like a no-brainer, right? We serve God. That's why we are here isn't it? To love and serve the God who loves us unconditionally. And our response to God's love is to devote our energy *including our finances* to doing God's work, to building the realm of God.

I know there are some of us who only have a few nickels to rub together, and for whom conversations about ethical wealth management are totally irrelevant. But we all have a little bit, and Jesus calls us to be faithful with the little or the lot that we have. You cannot serve God and, to use the old word, 'mammon'.

Mammon has come to mean more than wealth, it means acquisitiveness and covetousness – looking at what other people seem to have and wanting to have that too, wanting to have more.

I want to suggest this morning that as an act of devotion and surrender, we each give our entire financial situation, our hopes and our fears, our debts and our wealth to God. And that we make a practice of doing that regularly and listening for what God would have us do with what we have. For the way we use and invest our money is a vital part of our spiritual paths.

For those of us who have investments which we control it may mean reviewing and changing investments to socially responsible funds and companies. For some of us it may mean giving more to God's work in the church and in the world – moving to a place of a regular tithe – for some of us that may be more than the Biblical 10%. For others, giving your finances to God may simply mean giving your gift when you first get your income rather than looking at what's left at the end of the month.

For all of us it will mean thinking about the effect our choices have on the environment and buying less packaging, more local produce, less processed food and less stuff in general. It will mean giving thanks for all we have been given, remembering that we are stewards of the money and resources that we have, and using them to build bridges and to make connections rather than hoarding them for ourselves. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

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