

Personal, Curious, Generous, and Socially-Engaged Christian Faith

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Texts: Luke 16: 1-13

The passage I will read today is one of the stranger parables of Jesus, largely because, as traditionally read, it seems to imply Divine approval of dishonest and entirely self-serving behavior. I would normally save my background commentary for after the reading, but I am going to make two points here up front today, in order to increase the chances of you listening to the parable anew, with less puzzlement and more appreciation.

Point 1: Remember, it's a parable. Jesus used short stories like this in order to get people to think in new ways. In his parables, Jesus wasn't really trying to explain something, but saying: "I know you take such and such for granted, but what if the truth was actually to be found way *over there*? Can you see it? Get at least a glimpse?" Parables mostly aren't explanatory, but evocative. I hope this parable evokes something in you.

Point 2: I have become convinced after 35 years of living personally and professionally at the intersection of the Bible and faith today, that when it comes to money, Jesus had a vision that it is only fair to call "radical." What Jesus thought is best captured, I think, in a story from the New Testament when the religious teachers (Pharisees) and their government allies (Herodians) ask Jesus if he taught that people should or should not pay taxes to Caesar. He asks to see a coin, points out that the coin has Caesar's image on it, and says the famous line, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar, and to God what is God's." If you put that story in the context of his whole teaching and his life, you realize that Jesus would have his followers practice what we might call "non-participation" in the world's economy. The system of taxes that support empire, the draining of the meager resources of the poor to fill up the rich, the violence built into the whole system – it's just impossible to follow the way of God while participating in the system represented by that coin. Or, in language closer to the New Testament itself, the economy of empire, then and now, is part of this passing age, and Jesus was and is here to inaugurate the new age of God's kingdom – thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Now what that ethic of "non-participation" means for us today, is...complicated. I'm not laying down a rule for life, I'm just trying to give you a glimpse of the real teaching of Jesus. I mean, this is after all the guy who also said, clear as day, "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:33).

Lucky for you, or maybe lucky for the future of my employment, my sermon is not about those passages. That introduction though was necessary, though, to help you hear today's passage – and maybe get a glimpse of the truth way *over there*: a vision of two different economies, a death dealing economy of the present age, often called the economy of Mammon, and a life-giving economy of the inbreaking kingdom, the economy of God.

And with that, here we go...

And Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and there were complaints that this steward was wasting the rich man's property. And calling the steward he said,

‘What is this I hear about you? Justify all the accounts to me, for you can no longer be my steward.’ And the steward said to himself, ‘What are my options? My lord is taking the stewardship away from me. I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I see what I may do, so that once I am removed from stewardship the people might welcome me into their houses.’ And summoning each one of his lord’s debtors he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my lord?’ And he said, ‘A hundred baths of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill and quickly sit down and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘A hundred kors of grain.’ He tells him, ‘Take your bill and write eighty.’

And the lord praised the unprincipled steward, because he acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves from the Mammon of injustice, so that when it gives out, they may welcome you into places where you can live until you die.

Whoever is faithful in the least thing is also faithful in much, and whoever is unprincipled in the least thing is also unprincipled in much. If, therefore, you were not faithful with unjust Mammon, who will entrust you with true wealth? And, if you were not faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you anything for your own? No household slave can be a slave to two lords, for either he will hate the one and will love the other, or he will stand fast by the one and disdain the other. You cannot be a slave both to God and to Mammon.”

A few years ago, soon after I was called to my previous church, I was talking with one of my new colleagues whose title was “Associate Pastor for Christian Education and Spiritual Formation.” Obviously, he was responsible for a really important aspect of the church’s ministry. I was still sussing out how things worked in my new church, and I remember asking this colleague, “So, what’s the goal here? What kind of faith are you trying to form in people?” “What,” I asked, “is the vision here of what it means to be spiritually mature?”

I was a little shocked and fairly disappointed that this Associate Pastor for Christian Education and Spiritual Formation couldn’t answer the question. I was like, ugh, what kind of church have I hooked up with here? Even the Spiritual Formation guy doesn’t know what spiritual formation is. And I was even more shocked and disappointed when he asked, “And what does it mean to you to be spiritually mature?” and I was like, “Uh, I asked you first.”

That conversion stuck in my craw long enough that I decided I really needed to come up with a way to articulate what I think it means to be spiritually mature. The question became like a pop-song ear-worm in my mind: What does it mean to be spiritually mature? Etc.

For a few months, the question and elements of a response were bubbling around in my head – while I was preparing sermons, and reading scripture, and mowing the grass, and out for a run, and driving to work. What does it mean to be spiritually mature? It’s the same issue in my mind as our fall theme here at First Church – what does it mean to grow closer to God?

Not to belabor it any longer, after lots of reflection and distillation and pruning, pruning, pruning, here’s how I have come to express it: “To be spiritually mature is to have personal, curious, generous, and socially-engaged Christian faith.” Will you please break that down, Mike? Why yes, thank you for asking, I will.

Being spiritually mature means your faith is personal. Personal means you own it. You don't go along with it because others want you to or expect you to or because there is some extrinsic reward for it. It matters to you, like people you love matter to you. You don't do it just to get into heaven, but because faith is somehow compelling to you right now. I'd even say, you choose it. This isn't to say you've got it all figured out or are even confident about it, but you own the journey. It's personal.

Being spiritually mature also means you are curious in your faith. You want to discover more, recognizing that there is always more to discover. You never have it all figured out, and you are always discovering new ways it can be integrated into your life. You are curious about the Bible and are engaged in learning more. You are curious about the faith of other people, Christian and otherwise, and want to learn from them. You lean-in to the hard stuff, like what you can learn from suffering, and dissecting your own hesitations or fears. You are willing to learn and change. You're curious, actively curious, because there is always more to discover.

Being spiritually mature also means you are generous – of spirit and of wealth. Being generous of spirit means assuming the best about other people. Assuming that on any given day, other people are doing the best they can. It means remembering that when you look upon the face of others, especially those the world dismisses, you are looking upon the face of Jesus. And being generous of wealth is actually directly connected to being generous of spirit, because you see that what you have is not meant for you alone – but it is meant to contribute to the well-being of others – those others in whom Jesus lives. Used well, used to be a servant of God rather than a servant of Mammon, wealth connects us to others and builds broad community – especially with those who have been excluded from belonging in the past. We have completely inverted this in the world today, but wealth is not supposed to give us security – it's supposed to build belonging, and belonging with and to others gives us security. Generosity of spirit and wealth is part of being spiritually mature, of growing closer to God.

Being spiritually mature also means you are socially-engaged. Whether you are working at a micro level, like working to improve your community playground, or at the macro-level, like improving federal policy on climate change – whether you are giving rides to people on election day, or joining in civil disobedience against the growing authoritarianism in this country – there are a million ways to do it, but caring about the common life we share, in this country and around the world, is an expression of spiritual maturity. Other people matter. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

To be spiritually mature, to grow closer to God, means to get closer to personal, curious, generous, and socially-engaged Christian faith.

Is this aspirational? Of course. Are any of us all the way there? Of course not. So, how do I get there, you may ask. I suppose there are a thousand different ways, and many of them are part of the life of this congregation: worship, bible study, service, small groups, book groups, encouragement to pray and protest, the opportunity to be generous.

But for today, in this season when we are talking about growing closer to God, about what it might mean to be spiritually mature, I just hope it helps for you to hear how I have come to think about what that means. I hope my thinking helps you to think about what you believe it means to grow closer to God. Be intentional about it, because growing closer to God is a beautiful journey.

I'd say that being spiritually mature is having personal, curious, generous, and socially-engaged Christian faith. What would you say?

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

