

Sermon Preached October 11, 2015
Year B, Proper 23
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“There’s a story about an expert in diamonds who happened to be seated on an airplane beside a woman with a huge diamond on her finger. Finally, the man introduced himself and said, ‘I couldn’t help but notice your beautiful diamond. I am an expert in precious stones. Please tell me about yours.’ The woman replied, ‘This is the famous Klopman diamond, one of the largest in the world. But there is a strange curse that comes with it.’ Now the man was really interested. He asked, ‘What is the curse?’ As he waited with bated breath, she replied, ‘It is Mr. Klopman.’”

The reality is - any kind of valuable possession has the capacity to be a type of curse. It can get in the way of our relationship with God. Sometimes our ties to our possessions become greater than our ties to Jesus and his message. That is part of what is happening in today's gospel. In it Jesus is confronted by a rich young man who has followed all the commandments and wants to know what more he can do to inherit eternal life. Jesus looks at him with love and replies, "Sell all you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me." But that is too hard for the rich man and he walks away.

The passage is about priorities. Jesus is challenging the rich man that while his success with the commandments is admirable, money is still an obstacle for him and his relationship with God. From this story we are to ask ourselves about OUR priorities and where money and wealth fall into our vision of life. How do we use the resources God has given us? Do they enhance or hinder our relationship with God and others? This is the heart of stewardship.

Where we put our money says something about our values. Billy Graham once said, “A checkbook is a theological document; it will tell you who and what you worship.”¹

Last week we kicked off the St. John’s stewardship season. During this season you will hear from me and your fellow parishioners why we pledge to St. John’s and why we think this is a place worth supporting. We will conclude on Pledge Sunday, November 8, when we will offer our pledges at the altar.

But stewardship is much more than simply deciding how much money to give the church. Stewardship of the gifts God has given us is a much larger vision. It is about how we manage all that we do with all that we have.

It is a time set aside for us to ask ourselves if our lives have balance, and if they reflect our values, and if not, how do we shift them so that they

¹ <http://www.brethren.org/stewardship/documents/stewardship-quotes.pdf>, 10/9/15.

do? We can get caught up juggling soccer practices, evening meetings at work, driving kids to doctor's appointments, buying groceries, cooking supper, paying the mortgage, giving to charitable organizations, volunteering at the hospital, repairing the back porch, following up on phone calls and emails, paying car insurance, and maybe sometimes even getting together with friends. How do we balance it all? How exactly do we use our time and money? When we are in the midst of the scramble, we cannot see the forest for the trees. Stewardship season then becomes a gift because it is a reminder to us to stop, and reassess. Do our checkbooks and calendars reflect who and what we worship?

I spent two and one half years living in Lithuania as a missionary where I was the founding pastor of the English-speaking church in Klaipeda. Our family of four lived in a three and half room apartment with one bathroom.

It was an adequately furnished apartment; we ourselves only brought our clothes and a few personal items. At first I was worried how we were

going to live in such a small space, on top of each other, with no room for many possessions. I was accustomed to having more space, plus a basement and/or attic to store other possessions. Very quickly I realized that this small space was a gift! On a bad day I could clean the place from top to bottom in about half an hour. I had so much more free time! Life became spacious! I had more time to play with my kids, to meet with friends, to spend time with my husband, to read, to pray. It dawned on me that possessions are like anchors. They drag us down, and draw us away from what is important to us. Each possession requires care: cleaning, moving, storing, arranging, and so on. For each possession I own, another few minutes is removed from my life. Possessions become my masters and I the slave. I serve them. With the forced removal of most of my possessions, I became a free woman! It was exhilarating!

For the remainder of my days in Lithuania, every time I considered buying a possession, I would ask myself, “Is this worth giving up a

portion of my life to care for?” There were many things that were then replaced back on the store shelf.

Sadly, these days in the States I am no longer as vigilant. It is hard to be counter culture when we are awash with ads and consumerism. My possessions have grown from my days in Eastern Europe, but I still make efforts to resist buying the new and release what I already have. Honestly, I’m not great at it. But I think the expansiveness that I experienced in Lithuania is one of the things Jesus was getting at when he told the rich young man to sell all his things and give to the poor. The request isn’t only about giving to the poor, which it is. We are to give generously to the needy. But it is also about the young man getting a gift himself. A gift of new life, of freedom, of no longer being a slave to money or possessions.

A gift of trusting in God, not relying on self, of not feeling you have to singlehandedly hold yourself up. Jesus’ request to the young man to give up his money is an invitation to liberation.

Generally speaking, the Bible doesn't tell us to give up all our possessions. It tells us to give up only 10% to the church so God's work may be done. This is the tithe. We are to give up the first 10% of our earnings as a gift to God, in thanks for all that God has given us. In Leviticus it says, "Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord's" [Lev. 27:30]. I recognize that not all people can tithe, and those who can would need to work up to it incrementally over the years, but if you are able to do it, tithing one's income is freedom, and an unbelievable gift, to the giver. It's a way of saying to money, "I control you, you do not control me. I release you to God and trust in the results. God is the center of my life, not fear, and not money, but God."

Having money is not a bad thing. And all of us here in this room, by the world's standards, are rich. But money does have the capacity to inspire poor results in us, whether that be tightfistedness to the needy through fear of losing it, a failure to recognize that our money is not ours

but a gift from God, or becoming a slave to our possessions. These results cause suffering for others AND for ourselves. The antidotes are stewardship and tithing. This is why Jesus counseled the young man to just give his money away. The young man was likely centering his life on his money. The way to the Kingdom is by centering our lives on God, and working outward from there using everything at our disposal to further the work of Jesus, including our money. How we use our money is a spiritual endeavor.

Finally, notice that as Jesus tells the rich young man that he must give away all his money, knowing full well that he can't do it, Jesus still looks on the rich young man with love. In other words, even if we cannot give as generously as we would like, Jesus still loves us. Our value to God, and to St. John's, is not determined by how much we give to the church.

Many at St. John's are very generous, both with what you give in time and money, and many others are still working up to this. I encourage you all to welcome this stewardship season as an invitation to examine how you allocate your resources, for balance in your life, for the benefit of the church, for the enhancement of your spiritual lives, and to the glory of God.

Amen.