Reverend Jim's Sermon on November 19, 2023

Parish Council received an update on finances this week. There are no major issues, but we were informed that giving is down a bit. So, I pass that on just as information. I think we are all doing the best we can. I am not worried, not like a priest I know who is very concerned about his parish finances, he was even starting to lose sleep, so he went into his church to pray. He prayed, "Lord, what am I to do? How do I deal with this awful financial situation." God spoke to him, and said, "You know you shouldn't worry. To me a million years is like a single second, and a million dollars is like a single penny." Then the priest prayed, "Lord, can I have one of those pennies?" And God replied, "No problem, just give me a second."

The parables of Jesus use a variety of everyday metaphors from the life that he saw around him, like the parable of the wedding feast we had last week.

In today's parable we have a different kind of metaphor, one that is strangely ancient and modern at the same time. The metaphor at the centre of this parable is that of business and investing. Money.

Jesus talked a lot about money. By one reckoning of the 38 parables in the Gospel of Luke, 16 utilize financial metaphors. It is strange to think about Jesus being interested in money and business, but given how much he talked about it, there is little doubt that it held a great interest for him especially as a metaphor for how to be in relationship with God.
Jesus uses metaphors of banking and business to talk about what I would call the divine economy. The divine economy is about flow and exchange, a divine exchange, an exchange based on faith and trust rather than fear.
Today's parable involves a wealthy man who was going on a long journey. Taking a vacation perhaps or going off to do business out of town.
He calls his employees together and says, "while I am gone you are in charge of my business." He gives them all a certain portion of money to manage. One gets ten talents, another 2 and another 1. So, what is a talent anyway? It's actually a measure of weight used in the ancient world. Some scholars say that a talent is about 75 pounds, so 75 pounds of gold or silver is, well, a lot of money, an unimaginable sum for most of the people listening to Jesus preach. And for most of us for that matter.

The wealthy businessman divvies up his money and off he goes. Upon his returns, he calls his men in to see how they did. The first took the ten talents he was given and made some good deals and doubled the money, same with the one who got 2 talents. But the man who got one talent buried it in the ground because he was afraid it might get lost or stolen.
We see what happens. The two who doubled the master's money are promoted in the company and the guy who didn't do anything with the money got canned.

So what are we to make of this parable. The simple translation is that this is another story about *using,* rather than holding on to what God has given us, our wealth, our gifts, skills, energy and abilities.

It is about investing ourselves in life, and it is about what is really a natural law built into the universe. Simply put this law says when it comes to our assets and abilities, if we don't use them, we will lose them. How many times have you heard someone say: I used to speak good French or Spanish, but I have lost it over the years. If we stop using the abilities and skills, we have we will end up not having them for long.

If we take all our money and stick it in a safe what happens? Over time, because of inflation, our money will not keep its values. Over a long enough time, it will become worthless. Same money, less worth. The same is true of our investment in life. If we try to sit life out, our energies and abilities will diminish over time.

There is the line at the end of this parable that always stymies preachers: "To those who have much, more will be given, to those who have little, the little they have will be taken away."

I am not a Greek scholar and can't translate this line from the original, but I think there is a message here that becomes clearer by adding just a few words:

"To those who have much, and use what they have, more will be given, to those who have little, and fail to use it, the little they have will be taken away."

The Spirit of God cannot be diminished, but it can lie dormant in us. We can think of God's Spirit as divine energy that increases as we engage with it, and as we share it with one another. The spirit grows as we come into relationship with life, with God and with one another. The divine economy calls us to an exchange in which giving and receiving are indistinguishable, they are just different parts of the same exchange. The divine economy is one in which the only thing we can do wrong is to do nothing, to fail to participate, to hold on to what we think we have out of fear.

So, what does it look like to live in the divine economy? How is it different than the economy of scarcity and fear that most of society seems to live in?

It is about abundance. The divine economy is one in which there is more than enough. It is an economy that grows by giving rather than accumulating. It is an economy of community rather than individuality. It is an economy that sees that joy is in people rather than in things. In the divine economy the only currency is love.

In the divine economy each of us brings our unique gifts and talents to the building up of the community.

The Spirit will guide us in how to recognize our gifts and how best use what we have if we are open. In the divine economy no one is richer than anyone else, no one has more or less than anyone else; each of us has our part to play in order for the community to thrive.

As we go forward into an uncertain future as a church, I believe it is more important than ever that we make the distinction between the economy of Caesar, the economy of dollars and cents and the divine economy, that we do what the US dollar bill urges us to do and place our trust in God, that we stop worrying about the financial future which none of us have any control over anyway. And that we reflect not on what we don't have, but on how to contribute what we do. Because that is where true wealth, and true happiness, resides.

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