

**“Getting Connected Through Your Experiences”  
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September 23, 2007**

Our Fall Series continues today with this theme: “Getting Connected Through Our Experiences.” And guess what. We’ve all had them: from the mundane to the glorious, from the destructive to the restorative, from the hurting to the healing. And the call today is to consider how we bring *all* of our experiences to bear on our faith, and our faith to bear on all our experiences. It’s so easy to compartmentalize our lives—into our relationships, our professions, our politics, and our faith. But Jesus keeps calling us connect our experiences to the One who loves and restores and guides us.

Well, I must say that the *experience* of reflecting on our Gospel text for this morning has been nothing short of perplexing. The Son of the One who loves and restores and guides us is hard to grasp in today’s parable. Is Jesus really suggesting that we comport ourselves like that rascal manager?

Here’s this guy who has clearly been lacking in job performance. Word has gotten ‘round and chickens are coming home to hatch. And this manager

decides he better get while the getting's good. His arrogance is made plain: he's NOT about to consider a laborer's job. *That* would be beneath him. Instead, he connives. He figures he'll make friends in low places so that his boss' debtors will take him in when he gets canned. His actions do have a positive consequence for those debtors, and his rich master does appreciate that he at least got something from those who owed him. But, at the core, his motivation is selfish. There is no transformation. This man is dishonest in a little and in much. He is clearly serving wealth and *not* God...right?

Isn't Jesus' closing pronouncement in this reading—"You cannot serve God and wealth"—a critique of this steward's way of life? OR, is Jesus commending this guy for being prudent and clever in saving his own skin?

I wish I could give you a clear answer, drawn from centuries of Christian reflection and interpretation. But I cannot. Every commentary I've read expresses questions. Other pastors I've heard preach on this parable are perplexed. Yet, one thing IS sure. For Jesus, money matters. "You cannot serve God and wealth" is just one of many pronouncements in Luke's Gospel by Jesus about the ways in which money matters as a *matter* of faith.

Jesus is constantly telling stories about wealth vs. poverty, about abundant living vs. selfish hoarding, about generosity vs. greed. “God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty,” Mary sings.<sup>1</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,” Jesus proclaims.<sup>2</sup> “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled,” Jesus promises.<sup>3</sup> Even the Lord’s Prayer as it is recorded in the Gospels talks about money. “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”<sup>4</sup> “Sell your possessions! Give alms!”<sup>5</sup> “When you give a banquet, invite the poor...because they cannot repay you!”<sup>6</sup> “None of you can be my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”<sup>7</sup> Luke’s Gospel records those sayings of Jesus, and more. There is no denying it. Money matters. Our relationship *to* money, wealth, and possessions matters. Jesus cares about the disparity between rich and poor, and Jesus is constantly provoking his disciples to take stock of their lives. What do they really care about? What is their ultimate concern?

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:53

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:18

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6:20-21

<sup>4</sup> Matt 6:12 and Luke 11:4

<sup>5</sup> Luke 12:33

<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:13

<sup>7</sup> Luke 14:33

Jesus asks *us* these same questions, and he doesn't make it easy for us either, does he?

Today's Gospel ask us to reflect about money matters as matters of faith. And because of our theme this week, I want to share with you an experience of how I have had to confront such matters.

As a child, I knew that our family was okay. I knew that we had more than others and I also knew that we had a lot less than others, too. I knew there were children who were poor, and Sunday School offerings and Halloween Unicef boxes were meant to raise money for those who were less fortunate. I remember helping out at our church's food pantry. As a young adult, my recognition of privilege increased as I lived outside of Boston and then on the south side of Chicago and saw urban poverty. But I still felt pretty much in the middle of things because in those same places there were also gads of *really* wealthy people. I knew that Jesus really cared about the poor and that as a Christian this was a part of my witness, too, but I never felt like any of it was my responsibility. I wasn't part of the "rich and powerful." And so I didn't really take Jesus' provocations about wealth personally because they didn't really connect to my experience.

Until I moved to Cairo, Egypt. My husband, Stewart, had taken a teaching job at The American University in Cairo and I worked at an ELCA-sponsored refugee program and congregation. Our salaries would've put us near the poverty line in America. But in Egypt? We were rich. We were the wealthy. We could basically purchase anything money could buy. And, you know what, we had amazing experiences. But, it was also a terrible experience of undeserved privilege and power. Sure, I could make a list of all the reasons I merited a decent living. You know, I had worked hard, gotten a good education, was committed to serving people. None of that made any sense in the Cairene world of such widespread poverty, where I knew wonderful people—neighbors, fellow congregants, refugees--just as hard working as I who had *nothing*, who had been born into *nothing*, and had no chance of really improving their worldly situation. Every one of those people was created in the image of God--just like me--and loved by God--just like me—and so lists of reasons why it was “okay” for me to have so much more were not even pointless...they were faithless.

Stewart and I tried to feel better about profiting from a system of basic inequality by paying double the going rate for household help, for cab rides,

for tips at restaurants and stores. I used to buy lunch for 10 staff people every day at the refugee program where I worked and paid rent for a woman and her kids for a year. *And I'm not telling you this because I am proud of it*; I should've been doing much, much more. I was ashamed to be in such a position. I was ashamed because it was with embarrassment that Josephine—a college educated teacher from Sudan whose husband was either missing or dead—had to ask *me* for help to keep a shabby apartment for herself and her children. I felt indicted by my own ignorance of the real injustice in the world that thrives on the disparity of rich and poor, and for the first time, I began to grasp the power and provocations of what Jesus was saying in all of those stories and teachings. Blessed *were* the poor. And woe was me. The kingdom of God could not and will not look like the world as it is. Money, wealth, and possessions are not signs of God's favor. Lack of money, absence of wealth, or few possessions are not signs of God's displeasure. Such realities should be obvious to us all who worship God and not wealth. But, such assumptions creep in...

"By the grace of God go I." This was a phrase Stewart and I would often repeat as we shared experiences of daily life in Egypt. I was humbled into a new reception of the power of God's grace for both power-ful and power-

less, for both privileged and impoverished. I became more and more aware of how needful I really am for God's love, and how dependent I am on God's presence, of how my right relationship with God really has nothing to do with my own merit, but only with God's gracious decision to bless me and all people through the gift of Christ.

I returned to the United States more aware of poverty in *this* country than I had before and remain convinced that money matters *are* a matter of faith. I hear Jesus' voice in our scriptures as a constant challenge to each of us to grow in our understanding of generosity, abundant living, and economic justice. And I am grateful to be able to try to respond to this central part of our life knowing that I, like you, will never be separated from the love of God which is in Christ our Lord. Jesus is going to keep calling us to connect our experiences to the One who loves and restores and guides us. Let us do this together with courage and with hope. AMEN