**18 Pentecost**

**September 18, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

In the gospel reading this morning we hear one of the most unconventional stories in the entire Bible. The parable begins with the words, "there was a rich man" … it ends with a stark warning to people who "loved money." The author of Luke’s gospel is making it clear … Jesus didn't hesitate to use money as a yardstick to measure our spiritual health.

Jesus’ parable sounds unconventional … even crazy … because the rich man praises the dishonesty of his money manager, even as he fired him for poor performance. Knowing he would be fired, the money manager had cooked the books of his boss's clients to their advantage so that they would owe him favors when he was unemployed. The praise is directed not toward the manager's dishonesty per se, but for acting shrewdly in regards to what he cared most about … in this case, money … and therefore averting a future catastrophe.

Jesus then continues the story by drawing a parallel to the effect that if worldly people are so shrewd in regards to something as "insignificant" as money, should not the faithful be even more shrewd about the "true riches" of life in the kingdom of God? Then, in a final twist, Jesus joins the two strands and concludes with a stark warning: "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” Jesus is clear … he is saying that how we relate to money is an important barometer of how we relate to God.

I imagine that at least some of you have seen the movie ***The Big Short*** starring Brad Pitt, Steve Carrell, Ryan Gosling and Christian Bale. It is based upon a nonfiction bestselling book by Michael Lewis about the 2008 collapse of the financial markets. Now, I still don't understand credit default swaps or mezzanine collateralized debt obligations ... and according to Lewis, that's exactly how the rich Wall Streeters wanted it. Anyhow, I found the movie fascinating and the book even more so.

 "No ordinary human being," writes Lewis, "had ever heard of these credit default swaps … and hardly anyone could understand a subprime mortgage-backed collateral debt obligation." Those who didn’t understand these financial shenanigans included the clueless ratings agencies Moody's and Standard & Poor, the hapless Security and Exchange Commission, and even Ben Bernanke Chairman who was Chairman of the Federal Reserve at the time.

Credit default swaps fed upon the subprime mortgage boom, which made it possible for a low level office worker in Nevada to own five investment properties, or for a strawberry picker with an income of $14,000 a year to buy a $724,000 house. These mortgages to people "one broken refrigerator from default,” many of which required no proof of employment, income, or money down, were designed to fail, says Lewis, so that the poor borrowers were forced to re-finance with even riskier loans from the rich banks. Subprime mortgages with floating rates eventually comprised about 80% of mortgages. In the end, we … the tax payers … paid when the office worker and the strawberry picker defaulted on their loans. Taxpayers like you and me also bailed out the Wall Street executives who still "earned" tens of millions for their "work." Those Wall Street executive were shrewd like the money manager in Jesus’ parable.

As many of you know I am the oldest of six children … four boys and two girls. My brother Kirk is just a year younger than I am, and for thirty plus years he had a successful woodworking/ custom-cabinet business in Alexandria, Virginia. Park Woodworking built libraries in lawyers’ offices, high-end meeting rooms in foreign embassies, the two-story kiosk in Washington’s Union Station, and even one of the doors at the National Cathedral. But when the bubble burst Kirk’s business went south and he had to declare bankruptcy. This was not how he had planned to enter his retirement. However, he has landed on his feet … even as he lives with broken dreams.

My brother Kirk was just another of the too many people in the world around us living with the consequences of that particular economic downturn. My guess is that many of you have family members or friends who lost their businesses or their jobs. There are members in this congregation who are still looking for work commensurate with their skills and experience. And there are those who are retired and have had to adjust their lives because of the loss of income from investments.

It is not the purpose of this homily to rehash or place blame for the economic meltdown we experience almost a decade ago. However, if I am to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then I have to acknowledge the truth of his saying, “You cannot serve God and money.” The currency of our lives in this world is money, and unless we are willing to live entirely off the grid we all have to participate in our economy to meet our basic needs and beyond. To those around us who lost their jobs … sometimes their homes … life was turned upside down. But even my brother Kirk … who may darken the doorway of a church only once every few years … and then for a friend’s funeral … even Kirk has expressed that his bankruptcy did not wiped him out emotionally or spiritually. “I lost just about everything I owned and had worked for, but I still had my family and my friends. I wasn’t going to let my bankruptcy take over my life … there was still too much of it to be lived.”

Those economic times were difficult … and for some they were more difficult than for others … and for many the consequences of the financial collapse are still being felt. But there were those who shared what little they had with those who had fallen over the edge. When we speak of the “loving God of all creation, the God of all compassion,” we must remember that we cannot serve that God of compassion and also serve our own selfish greed at the same time. But few us in this room are filthy rich, and I believe that all of us are here because we recognize the injustice of the situation and have a sense of compassion for the most vulnerable around us. That is what it means to serve God, rather than mammon.

I end with a few words from the Jewish Yom Kippur service … the High Holy Day of Yom Kippur will be observed this year on October 11 …

Life is not fair. The wrong people get sick and the wrong people get robbed and the wrong people get killed in wars and in accidents. Some people see life’s unfairness and decide, “There is no God; the world is nothing but chaos.” Others see the same unfairness and ask themselves, “Where do I get my sense of what is fair and unfair? Where did I get my sense of outrage and indignation, my instinctive response of sympathy? Don’t I get these things from God? Doesn’t God plant in me a little bit of the divine outrage at the injustices and oppressions in the world, just as God did for the prophets of the Bible? Isn’t my feeling of compassion for the afflicted just a reflection of the compassion God feels in seeing the suffering of God’s creatures?” Our responding to life’s unfairness with sympathy and righteous indignation is God’s compassion and God’s anger working through us, and it may be the surest proof of all of God’s reality.

This parable of Jesus is certainly unconventional … even crazy … but it grabs one’s attention. I would imagine that it would even grab the attention of my brother Kirk. Caught in the teeth of the dragon of bankruptcy I think he knows now what Jesus meant when he said “You cannot serve both God and money.” Jesus is clear … he is saying that how we relate to money is an important barometer of how we relate to God.

Jesus praised the dishonest servant … not for his dishonesty, but for his cleverness. But Jesus also pointed out the distinction between the wealth of this world as we know it, and the wealth of God’s Kingdom.

*“And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”*

We are the “children of light” who are invited to apply the same diligence to our life of faith as we do to the currency of the world. In that way the currency of the world … money … is a tool by which we can serve God. But we cannot serve God and money at the same time.

Amen.