

“THE LIFE THAT IS TRUE LIFE,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 14, 2021

This morning gathered in worship we are confronted by an unusual parable or story about stewardship. As told by Jesus, an estate manager, who is about to be fired, decides to win friends for the sake of his own future by cancelling debts which others owe to his master. You would expect the man’s master to be furious at being defrauded beyond his back in this way. No doubt he is. But he is also impressed by the shrewdness of his estate manager whom he actually praises for such a display of wiles. (*Luke 16: 1-8*)

Now I can’t imagine Jesus ever endorsing or condoning any kind of dishonesty. Yet he shares this story of the estate manager who gives his master’s money away as a lesson and example for us. Basically, Jesus’ message to us is this: in order to assure our own eternal future, we too need to be astute and shrewd enough to graciously and generously give away those material things with which God has entrusted to us as stewards. Bringing this message home, Jesus admonishes all who have ears to hear: “Make friends for yourselves with worldly wealth so that when it gives out, you will be welcomed in the eternal home.” (*Luke 16:9*) Jesus’ assumption is that we will have the wisdom to realize that our generosity should be towards the indebted, who are oppressed and in need, rather than our own rich buddies who already have plenty.

Importantly, Jesus continues this lesson on stewardship with a warning. “No servant,” he observes, “can be the slave of two masters.” “Such a slave,” he explains, “will hate one and love the other or will be loyal to one and despise the other.” The bottom line, as Jesus quite bluntly makes clear, is that “You cannot serve both God and money.” (*Luke 16:13*)

Congregation, have profounder words have ever been spoken? In times like our own, awash in selfishness, greed, and materialism, we need to have ears to hear what Jesus is saying. The double lesson he delivers on stewardship deserves some thoughtful introspection on our part. Blessed by what God has placed at our disposal and entrusted to our stewardship, how well are we preparing for our eternal future? As professed men and women of faith, where do our loyalties really lie? Put yet another way, what or who is the focus of our most fundamental commitment and devotion in this life? God and his purposes? Or someone or something else? Whom do we truly serve?

In our St. Paul confirmation classes for eighth and ninth graders I spend a lot of time with our youth talking about personal faith and our understanding of God. One of things I tell our kids right off is that we can discern whatever god is getting worshipped in someone’s life by observing what that person really reverences or values. More specifically, how they are spending their time, talents, and money? Indeed, as Jesus declares in the Gospel according to Matthew: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (*Matthew 6:21*)

Truth to be told, any of us can sing praises to the God revealed through the prophets and Jesus on Sunday, but actually worship a very different god throughout the week. It's a sad fact that some of the loudest singing Christians are entangled with other masters, other gods. In many cases, they are self-duped or perhaps misled by others whom they admire and follow. Consequently, they may have no conscious awareness of the extent to which they are worshipping something other than the God who at Mt. Sinai commanded that we should have "no other Gods" before him. (*Exodus 20:3*) But such lack of self-awareness doesn't let them off the hook or allow them to escape God's ultimate judgment upon their idolatry and misdirected stewardship of the blessings divinely made possible for them.

Preaching in the spirit of Christ, the Apostle Paul expressly warns us against "a love of money," which he describes as the "root of all evil." (*1 Timothy 6:10*) "[T]hose who want to get rich," he explains, "fall into temptation and are caught in the trap of many foolish and harmful desires, which pull them down to ruin and destruction." (*1 Timothy 6: 9*) However, we need to respectfully note that there are certainly other temptations that can lead us astray from the one true God. We can go overboard in our quest for power or our passions for nation and family. In the process we displace the God whom the prophets and Jesus call us to worship.

As I see it, one of the major problems bedeviling America today is that too many people have made their political and economic ideology their theology. Their brand of economics and politics matters more to them than doing the will of the true God. Folks, we need to remember that what we imagine to be the "American way" may not be the same as or compatible with God's way. And capitalism may have its virtues and be one of the better ways to motivate people and disperse resources in a fallen world, but it was not exactly what Jesus had in mind when he taught that "anyone who has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same." (*Luke 3:11*) Consequently, both super-patriots and the most ardent capitalists need to beware. Good intentions notwithstanding, patriotic and economic fundamentalisms may swamp the faith that really counts and keep us far from heaven. It is a wise man or woman who never forgets that even our American pledge of allegiance calls us to be "one nation, *under God*." That applies to the way we conduct business, steward resources not only for our personal benefit but also the common good, and guide our country in its relationship with the rest of God's world.

Of course, family life is also precious, a beautiful thing. As Christians we should certainly encourage and nurture it. But, here too, a good thing can go bad, where we exalt family ties and solidarity above our devotion to the God whom Jesus so intimately called upon as "Abba, Father." (*Mark 14:36*) I used to challenge my own late mother on this score. Coming as she did from an immigrant family, where hanging tough together is

so important in a strange new land, one of her favorite mottos was “Blood is thicker than water.” If she said it once, she said it a million times. When my brothers and I were kids, she actually loved reading us the fictional story of five identical-looking Chinese brothers who, each with a different fantastic talent, successfully defy authorities unfairly charging their sea-swallowing brother with the death of a drowned neighbor-boy. It’s a great story but with a dubious message if read blindly without some moral discernment. “Mother,” I later used to say, as a rejoinder to her “Blood-is-thicker-than-water” mantra, “we are *not* the Mafia and shouldn’t want to be!”

Significantly, in his own ministry, Jesus dramatically disagreed with those in a still tribal-minded Jewish community who stressed loyalty to the biological family and its prosperity and advancement above all else. As Jesus announces in the Gospel according to Mark: “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers [and sisters]? ...Whoever does what my Father in heaven wants him to do is my brother, my sister, and my mother!” (*Mark 12:48-49*) That is the same spirit which should guide us in all things, including our stewardship of the blessings that God bestows upon us.

The Apostle Paul was right on point when in his own teaching he thundered: “What did we bring into the world? Nothing! What can we take out of the world? Nothing! So then, if we have food and clothes, that should be enough for us.” (*1 Timothy 6: 7-8*) The Protestant reformer Martin Luther was on mark too when in his great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, he counseled us in due time to “let goods and kindred go” because we can’t take them with us where we ultimately want to be headed. We make a grave spiritual mistake if we become too worshipful and selfishly attached towards anything of this world at the expense of our greater devotion to our Biblically proclaimed God. Indeed, Jesus warned us against the dangers of worldly attachments when he remarked that it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man” or, presumably, a powerful man or woman “to enter the kingdom of heaven.” (*Mark 10:25*) The mistake which the rich and powerful too often make is that they trust and rely upon their own wealth and position instead of placing their first trust in God. By fateful choice, they thus become—to borrow a phrase from the British poet Alfred Lord Tennyson and a more recent play—“children of a lesser god.”

There’s a current ad right now for a VISA card which, after touting its advantages, pointedly asks, “What’s in your wallet?” In other words, what card are you carrying? Similarly, we might ask today, what God is in your heart? Yes, what God are you carrying—or, rather, letting carry you? It’s actually an age-old question, which the ancient Israelites had to answer--*first* with Moses, when he came down from his meeting with God at Mt. Sinai and discovered his people worshiping a Golden Calf (*Exodus 32*), and *then again* with Moses’s successor, Joshua, as he led them across the River Jordan into the Promised Land. Joshua laid it on the line, calling upon the Israelites to reject any

lesser gods and false, selfish, corrupting values that go with them. In an extraordinary, stirring speech recorded by our Old Testament, Joshua declares:

“Now then...honor the Lord and serve him sincerely and faithfully. Get rid of the gods whom your ancestors used to worship in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and serve only the Lord. If you are not willing to serve him, decided whom you will serve... As for my family and me, we will serve the Lord.” (*Joshua 24:14*)

The God to whom Joshua and his household vowed renewed allegiance and loyalty that day was a God calling his own sons and daughters to a life of justice, compassion, and generosity, even to the point of equitably redistributing all land every half-century in what called a “Jubilee Year.” (*Leviticus 25:8-17*)

Congregation, harkening to Joshua’s words uttered as many as 3500 years ago, we need to make our own declaration of loyalty to the God above all lesser gods and demonstrate our conviction by actions. What is needed daily on our part as sincere people of faith are deeds of unselfish stewardship that reflect our awareness that all our blessings in terms of time, talent, and treasure come to us from God with his expectation that we will employ them unselfishly for a greater good.

Once again, the Apostle Paul, who lends his name to our own church, expresses all this more wonderfully than I can. While imprisoned for his work as an evangelist, Paul exhorts Timothy, his younger colleague, to boldly continue their ministry all on his own, offering these precious words of instruction:

“Command those who are rich in the things of this life not to be proud, but to place their hope, not un such an uncertain thing as riches, but in God, who generously gives s everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share with others. In this way they will store up for themselves a treasure which will be a solid foundation for the future. And then they will be able to win the life which is true life.” (*1 Timothy 6:17-19*)

Congregation, by ancient standards all of us are rich, even if in American life today we don’t think of ourselves in such terms. In short, Paul’s instructions to Timothy are commandments meant for us.

On this annual Stewardship Sunday, we have an opportunity to declare anew our loyalty to the God above all the lesser gods who might tempt us as we each bow our heads in prayer before him. And we are called to further demonstrate that same loyalty and allegiance by being generous in sharing the time, talents, and treasure which he has entrusted to us for faithful stewardship. The ministries taking place right here in God’s name need your gifts and your help. A wider world does too. Let none of us be stingy as stewards with what God has entrusted to our discretion and use. Those of us who affirm the God above all lesser gods and share his blessings already bestowed upon us will be those who share in God’s glory and light for eternity. **Amen**