

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY – C

September 23, 2007

The words “money” and “spirituality” are seldom found in the same sentence. And yet, St. Luke and other biblical writers give a lot of attention to money and possessions. In St. Luke’s personal experience there seems to have been some tension between rich and poor, and he took a special interest in the problem.

When you stop and think about it, money and spirituality really are connected. If we define spirituality in a broad sense to mean how we stand before God and how we relate to others, then money inevitably becomes an important aspect of our spirituality.

I think it’s safe to say that Jesus was not an economist. If he were physically walking the earth today I doubt very much that he would pay any attention to the stock market or pay into an IRA. So if we’re looking for his *financial* wisdom and advice we might just as well forget it. But what we *can* expect from Jesus are wise principles and standards that can be our guidelines regarding money and possessions.

Today’s Gospel consists of four segments, or units, of different lengths, all concerned with money and spirituality. Each of these units can stand on its own, and probably did at one time. St. Luke, like the other Gospel writers, often rearranged and edited the sayings of Jesus to make a point. These units here have been joined together because they deal with the same general topic.

The first and longest unit is traditionally called the parable of the dishonest steward. Apparently he was misusing and wasting his employer’s resources, and got himself caught. He devises a clever plan—maybe shrewd is a better word—to save himself from disgrace and financial ruin. He decides to give them a big discount.

Now, there are two ways we can interpret his plan. One is that the steward is simply dishonest and is involving others in his plot in order to set them up for blackmail in the future. The other way of looking at it, one that obviously gives him the benefit of the doubt, is that he gives the discount by removing his own commission so he can sacrifice a short-term gain for long-term security.

Whichever way we prefer to look at it, we have to admit that his strategy is so clever that even his employer had to admire it. The point of the story is that many people in the world—probably more today than in Jesus’ time—have enormous intelligence and energy in financial matters, compared to the tiny little bit of attention they pay to the state of their souls.

The creativity and effort and time that go into making money and financial security often far outweigh the thought and consideration given to the ultimate questions of life, such as “Who am I?” “What is my *real* goal in life?” “What is my relationship with God, and others?” These are questions we *all* should be asking ourselves regularly and praying over.

The second unit in our Gospel today urges people to use their money wisely in order to gain good friends. This might sound a little fishy, even superficial and insincere, but in the long run it makes good sense. Jesus means that if you should lose all your money, people you have helped in the past will be likely to help you out in time of need. And beyond that, when you die they may welcome you into their heavenly home. So Jesus here is talking, not about financial wealth, but about relationships.

The third unit suggests there is a connection between how a person handles money and material possessions and how they handle spiritual matters. Those who are trustworthy financially are likely to be the same spiritually.

The fourth unit reminds us that “no servant can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and mammon.” Well, who is this mammon? Actually mammon is a what, not a who. Mammon comes from the Semitic root word meaning something one puts faith in or trusts, and so it came to mean money. This doesn't mean that money is bad, on the contrary, it can do many good things. But when it becomes the center of one's life and everything else (even people) take a back seat, then there's a problem with priorities.

These four units of today's Gospel remind us that money and spirituality really are connected, and that how we use money can say a lot about the nature of our spiritual life. We see this in today's first reading from the OT prophet Amos, where we learn that greed, exploitation of the poor and dishonest business practices are not new. They go way back hundreds, even thousands of years, and they were and still are sinful in God's eyes.

I really enjoy readings like the ones we have today because they make us think. Even though they were written very long ago, the message is just as valid today. Am I responsible and trustworthy with my earthly possessions? Do I value my spiritual life more than these things? Am I generous with those in need, both financial need and spiritual need? Do I have moments that I'm actually embarrassed by my own selfishness and greed? Does this damage my relationship with God and with other people?

It might be difficult to look in the mirror and answer these questions honestly, but I think it's something we all need to do once in a while. God has generously given us many wonderful gifts, both material and spiritual, and as we have seen, the connection between them is real. How we use them makes all the difference in the world.