



'Together We Do More: Wrestling with Ministry'

Lectionary 26 – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
8:30 & 10:45 am, September 25, 2016

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[Amos 6:1a, 4-7](#); [1 Timothy 6:6-19](#); [Luke 16:19-31](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let me tell you the tales of two people I know. One gentleman, a fellow pastor I knew years ago, delighted in the way he and his wife would handle their vacation. Whenever they went on vacation, they made it their goal to return home with as little money as possible. Whatever was left in their wallets by the time they reached the last day of vacation was to be spent until those wallets were empty. This meant that on their drive home from the beach or wherever, as they cruised up, say, I-95, they'd make certain they had breakfast and lunch, and when they reached, say, I-83, they'd stop at that Rutter's at the Lewisberry Road exit, and proceed to pick up 2 big coffees, a lottery ticket, and a gallon of milk for the fridge—whatever it took to empty out the wallet. I think they found it fun, a source of entertainment, almost an adventure to use up every bit of money on their vacation.

Now here's the other person I know. The father of a dear friend was moderately wealthy as living standards go. But he often told her that he came into this world broke and intended to leave it in a similar fashion. Only he didn't take up the quest to spend every last dime on his vacation. Actually, his quest was to give away what he had. He wanted to share it, bless others with it, and express gratitude to God with it by imitating God's generosity.

Such are the tales of two men who wanted to empty their wallets, but for quite different purposes. Now, most of us can't judge the first man **too** harshly. After all, which one of us hasn't blown money frivolously, coveted some shiny bauble, or purchased an item we never used but instead shoved toward the back of the closet? Which one of us hasn't taken something of ours to the Salvation Army, feeling good about our generosity, and the long ago price tag is still on the object we donate? Which of us hasn't gone through those moments where it's "I've just got to have one of those new fan-dangled thing-a-ma-bobs!" and we've maxed out our credit cards or emptied our wallets for something we want?

On the other hand, I suppose most of us can't imagine embracing exactly what the second gentleman held as his philosophy. After all, we're busy dealing with orthodontia payments and tuition loans, mortgages and medical bills. The idea of having nothing left—even if it's near the end of our earthly life—is pretty scary. And maybe not entirely feasible.

Yet the second man's empty wallet philosophy is certainly closer to the intent of Paul's words in our reading today—closer than the first man's philosophy. In Paul's first letter to his friend and pastor Timothy, he writes this: *... for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it...* (1 Timothy 6:7). Paul speaks of the reality of our earthly lives, which is one of vulnerability and utter dependence both at the beginning and the end. Only you and I know what usually happens in the in-between: In between birth and death, we attempt to make ourselves sufficient unto ourselves so we don't **feel** that vulnerability, and don't **have** to depend on others. And in some cases, it leads to an anxious, frenetic lifestyle, distracted as we are by this pursuit of self-sufficiency.

Paul deals with that notion, too. You know, Paul serves as a mentor for young Timothy, so Timothy's ministry might be faithful and fruitful. Timothy is leading congregations in the city of Ephesus, now in modern-day Turkey. Ephesus was a large and thriving city, with great diversity economically. No doubt Christian communities in that city covered the spectrum between the haves and the have-not-so-much and the have-nots. Paul has something to say to them all.

Paul's words are intended to make Timothy and those congregations wrestle with their ministry and calling. So Paul doesn't just declare the truth about our coming into this world empty-handed and leaving the same. He also declares the journey between those two states is to be marked with contentment and generosity, with a looking out for others and not simply a looking out for one's self.

Contentment is experienced when a person recognizes that all that they have, and even sometimes the little that they have, may actually be enough. Those folks in Timothy's congregations—those “have-not-so-much” who are not wealthy—who find themselves with only the basics and not much more (“basics” being food, clothing, shelter, as Paul indicates)? They are encouraged to rest secure in those things, appreciate them, enjoy them, give thanks for them, and declare to others about this gracious God of ours whose provision of daily bread is sure.

As for the folks who have much wealth—those “haves” who have little worry about the basics because they have plenty of the basics and more? Well, they are encouraged to be generous and ready to share with those in the community whose needs are great (the “have-nots”), and whose journey between birth and death is one of ongoing vulnerability.

Does this seem too simplistic as congregations like Trinity wrestle with ministry in 2016? Or is it truly that simple? **Contentment in the basics, generosity in the surplus, and a commitment to sharing both our faith and fortune with others?**

Frankly, doesn't that pretty much sum up Jesus' life? Read the Gospel of Luke, and you see it is so. Our Lord came into this world with nothing—a carpenter's son born if not into poverty, then at least only into a life where basics weren't taken for granted. And Jesus left this world with nothing—stripped of clothing and dignity, and bereft of any human kindness toward him in his agony on the cross. And yet, his journey in between birth and death was a life like this: Telling his followers to consider the lilies of the field and not

worry endlessly about what they would eat or drink. Blessing the five loaves of bread and two fish that his disciples had among them, and distributing its abundance to the thousands sitting on the ground. Spinning stories of a gracious kingdom that, in spite of appearances, was growing exponentially. Spending himself as he taught, healed, forgave, blessed, welcomed, loved and was fully present with anyone who came near. Born in vulnerability and utterly dependent upon the provision and power of God, and yet, living a rich life of faithfulness and fruitfulness.

When I consider those two men and their empty wallet stories, I realize the man who made it his goal to spend all on his vacation was choosing to serve himself. The man who intended to give away what he had before he died was choosing to serve others. Note Paul doesn't indicate that money is the root of all evil (a phrase routinely taken out of context). Rather, he says that the **love** of money is the root of all evil. The love of money moves us to attempt self-sufficiency, thinking we need neither God nor our neighbor. Paul says that self-sufficiency is a myth.

Let me tell you the tale of one Jessica Baldwin, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is a bride-to-be, busy with all those details of wedding flora and falderal. It's an exciting time for Jessica, as she and her fiancé prepare for their wedding day. Jessica was familiar with the current popularity of bachelorette parties, the matching t-shirts, a glittering faux tiara crowning the bride-to-be, the excesses of an entire long weekend. But Jessica decided that she and her bridesmaids wouldn't empty their wallets for such things. Instead, their wallets were emptied for women at a local homeless shelter. Jessica and her friends gave the women a day of pampering: Haircuts and manicures, a shopping spree, a fine dinner at a restaurant. Jessica said, "This was just the perfect way to celebrate the beginning of a new chapter in my life." By helping the homeless women, in some small way, begin a new chapter in theirs.

Contentment in the basics, generosity in the surplus, and a commitment to sharing both our faith and fortune with others. Today and in the days to come we wrestle with ministry—the acts we do as individual disciples, and those we do together as the Body. We live out the gracious kingdom that continues to grow in and among each of us. **AMEN.**

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