

Proper 21, Year C

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[Amos 6:1a,4-7](#)[Psalms 146](#)[1 Timothy 6:6-19](#)[Luke 16:19-31](#)**You Can't Take It With You**

I wonder if you saw this on the news: last year a local business man was buried with some of his large fortune. The story is that soon after he discovered he was dying he invited his priest, his doctor, and his lawyer to join him for lunch one day. He wanted very badly, he told them, to take some of his money with him. They all thought he was being a little crazy, but they agreed to do what he asked. He gave each of them \$30,000 in cash in an envelope, and requested that they place the envelopes in his coffin with him. With some reluctance they agreed to the man's plan.

After the funeral, the doctor and the attorney joined the priest in the limo headed to the cemetery. The priest was the first to break down. "Guys, I have a confession," he said. "You know we've been trying to collect funds for that new stained glass window. I couldn't resist. I took \$10,000 out of the envelope before I put it in the coffin." The doctor came next. He said, "Father, don't beat yourself up too badly. You know we really need this new CT scanner down at the hospital, and I took \$20,000 out of my envelope." The attorney shook his head. "You two really ought to be ashamed of yourselves; but don't worry about it. I've taken care of it. This man was our friend. That's why I took both of your envelopes and mine out of the coffin and replaced them my own personal check for the full amount."

You can't take it with you. No matter how hard we might try. The Egyptian

Pharaohs tried as many a king has done, having their fortunes buried with them for use in the afterlife. Herod the Great himself, that persecutor of his own people who slaughtered the innocents in search of the Christ child, a threat to his power, was buried with all of his royal jewelry in his extravagant tomb that today lies in ruins just a stone's throw from Bethlehem. The Herodium today is a barren archeological dig and tourist attraction filled with dust. No jewels or riches to be found. "For we brought nothing into the world," Paul writes in the first letter to Timothy, "so that we can take nothing out of it." Nothing we have truly belongs to us. Everything belongs to God, including ourselves; we are simply entrusted with it for a time as stewards. One day our time of caring for our gifts will end, and everything we have will stay behind. You can't take it with you.

That's where we get the term stewardship. Stewardship is about the things we have been given to care for. The church makes a huge mistake every year—St. Paul's included—when we talk about our annual "stewardship campaign." Whenever we ask people to give money to the church the effort falls into this category, but stewardship is about way more than the annual pledge drive. Stewardship has to do with what all of our readings talk about today: "using the gifts we've been given to do the work God is calling us to do."¹ That's stewardship: *using the gifts we've been given to do the work God is calling us to do.*

In 1 Timothy Paul is reminding us of this. Not only does Paul tell us we can't take it with us, he also offers us a famous biblical quotation that many of us know. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." This short phrase is worth looking at closely.

¹ Jeannie Babb, "Stewardship In Parishes: Not Just A Pledge," *Musings* (blog), *Sewanee School of Theology*, accessed Fall, 2015, <http://musings.sewanee.edu/post/story/stewardship-in-parishes-not-just-a-pledge>.

Sometimes people misquote this phrase and say “money is the root of all evil.” That’s not what it says at all. It says the *love* of money is *a* root of *all kinds* of evil. The love of money, just like the love of any material thing, is unhealthy.

The Bible is not anti-wealth. Though if you were listening to the reading from Amos you might think so as it says, “Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria. Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches.” Amos goes on to criticize people who sing idle songs and drink wine and use fine lotions. He’s railing against people who bask in the luxuries of a materialistic society, using them only for themselves and failing to share with others. You might also think the Bible is anti-wealth if read the gospel of Luke that gives us lines like “you cannot serve God and wealth,” which we heard last week; and today Luke offers this story of the rich man who ends up in hell while Lazarus, the poor man, lounges on Abraham’s bosom. It’s true that the wealthy do not end up looking very good in the Bible, despite what some “prosperity gospel” preachers will tell you today. The prosperity gospel is a false teaching that leads people to believe wealth is a sign of God’s favor. The Bible, and particularly these passages from 1 Timothy and Luke, push right back against that idea.

Nevertheless, it’s important for us to hear that the Bible is *not* anti-wealth. The Bible is *anti-wealth without responsibility*.² The problem with the rich man in Luke’s parable isn’t that he’s rich, it’s that he basks in luxury while passing the poor many at his gate by every day. Money, just like anything else, can come to own us, and can become

² Christopher Bryan, “Luke-Acts,” lecture delivered to BIBL 511: New Testament Foundations I class, April 26, 2007, University of the South School of Theology, Sewanee, TN.

barriers to our relationship with God. It could be my money, or it could be my intellect, or my piety, or my patriotism, or food, or drink, or sex, or anything at all. Whatever gift we have. When God finished creating the world what did God say about the creation? That it was *very good*. All created things are good. But we all misuse things at our own expense or at the expense of others. Hence, the money and wealth addressed in all these readings can become a barrier to our relationship with God when they own us rather than us owning them. All things are gifts from God, placed in our stewardship, and meant for sharing.

Let's look again at 1 Timothy. Paul talks about there being great gain in "godliness combined with contentment." Basically, he means there's godliness in being content with what we do have rather than desiring to be rich. Listen again to what he says: "for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing *out* of it;"—i.e. *you can't take it with you*—"but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For *the love* of money is *a root of all kinds of evil*, and in their eagerness to be rich *some* [not all] have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." In our culture today I think this rings true. We're tempted by the culture to believe we never have enough, and that we should strive for more at all costs. To do so is a sign of true success in our culture—the one who dies with the most toys wins. But it's not what the gospel of Jesus, who gave up everything to the point of death, says is the true sign of success.

People in the first century who heard Paul's letter would have recognized Paul's word for "contentment" as "Greek philosophical term for the virtue of independence from

material goods.”³ Being free of the oppressive desire for more. Or, like Sheryl Crow once sang, “It’s not having what you want, it’s wanting what you’ve got.” When you really look at it, even those of us in this room who have the least still have a great deal more than many in the world. I read recently that “Over three billion people — more than half the world population as of 2010 — live on less than \$2.50 US Dollars (USD) a day. More than 80% of the population lives on less than \$10 USD per day. To put that in perspective, the average American spends about \$7 USD a day on entertainment alone, and more than twice that on transportation.”⁴

Yet, even though we can’t take it with us, we want more and more. We are not content. As one writer put it,

We are a nation in love with shiny objects. Our homes, our cars, our offices, our purses and that storage unit we hate to acknowledge are all overflowing with our precious belongings. Whether your personal weakness is shoes, cars, jewelry, cigars or any other possession (vintage posters, books and watches are my downfall), we Americans love our stuff. Why, in a land of plenty, do Americans want more? And why is more never enough? Given that most Americans would readily admit that money and material possessions are not going to make us happy, why do we continue to act as if they will?⁵

Paul councils us to “fight the good fight,” as he says, against a culture of materialism. I don’t think he means at all that we cannot enjoy ourselves, or that I can’t buy comic books anymore, or indulge in a nice dinner out, or a concert. Listen to how he councils the rich (and, by the way, as people who live far above what most of the world lives on, most of us in here really are pretty well-off). Paul writes, “As for those who in

³ Carolyn Osiek, *The Catholic Study Bible (Second Edition)*, ed. Donald Senior and John J. Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1606 NT.

⁴ “How Much Money Per Day Does The Average Person Live On?,” wiseGEEK, accessed September 24, 2016, <http://www.wisegeek.com/how-much-money-per-day-does-the-average-person-live-on.htm>.

⁵ James A. Thomas, *Shiny Objects: Why We Spend Money We Don't Have in Search of Happiness We Can't Buy* (San Francisco: Harperone, 2011), 2-3.

the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.” Do good to others. Share with others. Be generous. Don’t horde the many gifts we have only for ourselves, be it our money, or our abilities, or our time. Why would we? We can’t take it with us—we are only stewards of the gifts God lavishes upon us. Everything is a gift from God, and God’s gifts are placed in our care to be used for good.

In other words, stewardship is about opening my heart. A closed heart is like the heart of the rich man in Jesus’ parable who walked from his palatial estate every day indifferent to the man suffering outside of the gate. Notice that the rich man isn’t guilty of persecuting or mocking Lazarus. He doesn’t call the cops to have him carted away. He isn’t overtly ugly to him.⁶ Yet, even though he ignores him he *knows Lazarus’ name*. When he sees him in death across the chasm lounging with Abraham the rich man (who is nameless in the story) *knows Lazarus’ name*. He is simply indifferent to the man’s needs which may be the worst emotion of all. Hate isn’t the opposite of love. At least there’s passion in hate. The opposite of love is indifference. The rich man was indifferent—he had a closed heart. With a closed heart he could not be a good steward of all that God had given him.

One of my favorite poets Mary Oliver once wrote, “if the doors of my heart ever

⁶ Charles B. Cousar, *Feasting on the Word (Kindle Edition)*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Year C, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Loc. 4604.

close, I am as good as dead.”⁷ She’s on to something. An open heart has plenty of room to store the treasure that endures, the kind we can truly enjoy in this life, and take with us in the life to come.

⁷ Mary Oliver, “Landscape,” <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2005/03/22>.

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