

Sermon preached on 23 September 2007 at

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Proper 20-C

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One of the blessings of being part of the Episcopal Church is that we are connected to other Christians throughout the world. The Episcopal Church is part of the world-wide Anglican Communion. As such, we are connected to Christians in Tanzania and Traverse City, The Dominican Republic and Detroit. This interconnection helps us keep in mind the universal nature of the Church. Christ's message of new Life is not a message that applies to merely one country or one language; it is a message of life which applies to ALL the earth's people. As an Episcopal Priest, I am incredibly thankful for the gift of the Communion because it has brought me into relationship with people from across the world who teach me about the incredible calling that ALL of us share; the calling to be good stewards; the calling to serve God with all that we have: our minds, our hearts, our sweat, our money, our time.

Many of you have heard of Drs. Michael and Anita Dohn. They are medical missionaries who live in the Dominican Republic and are partially supported by St. John's. The Dohns had a life like so many other Americans. They were well-educated, they lived in a nice suburb of Cincinnati (not too different from Plymouth, Northville, or Canton), they had successful careers as medical doctors, they were members of the Episcopal Church, and God called them to serve God with all that they had—to be stewards of their gifts.

The Dohns now live in a neighborhood where electricity is sporadic at best. In place of a high salary and a good retirement, they now live off the donations of people like you and me. In place of a climate controlled home, they now live in a house where the temperature rarely drops below 78 and is often in the 90's. The Dohns' life looks nothing like it used to, and that is because they were called by God to be missionaries overseas.

They, along with you and me are called to be good stewards. For the Dohns this calling has been manifested through long-term mission work. Their stewardship has transformed their lives and the lives of the people they serve just as the call to stewardship must transform our lives and those whom we are called to serve.

Today's Gospel is challenging and hard to understand. In it we hear the story of a man who has mismanaged his boss' money. We don't know exactly what he has done in the past, but whatever it was this prodigal manager is called wicked (not dishonest) by Jesus.

When the wicked manager's boss finds out about his mismanagement the boss calls him to task. Knowing that a pink-slip is on its way and that he has no other job prospects (no digging, no begging—apparently the wicked manager lives in an economy in desperate need of diversification!) the wicked manager needs to curry favor so he will have a way to live. As such he calls in his master's debtors and forgives a major percentage of their debt. Knowing that his boss will want to save face, and thus not reinstate the full debt, the manager has guaranteed himself friends for life, friends that will look out for him and provide for his needs. At the very least, the wicked steward wrote off 450 gallons worth of olive oil and 500 bushels of grain to just two debtors—worth well over 20,000 dollars in today's terms—so as to buy himself a future.

Clearly, the wicked manager is, in fact, a shrewd and resourceful man when faced with a major crisis. While acting unethically, the manager used all his resources and knowledge to protect his future. Jesus goes on to tell us that we too are called to use all of our resources and knowledge to procure a good future. In this case, our future is not to be beholden to ill-got wealth, or to the serving of our own person desires and wants (what Luke calls Mammon) but instead we are called to do all we can to serve God.

Christ tells his disciples that we have two options. We have the option of living a life serving Mammon, serving our own selfish desires which are aimed at self-glorification, self-enrichment, self-preservation OR a life of serving God, a life that leads to richer and fuller life for all.

While choosing Mammon can often seem harmless it points to a basic sickness. The issue is not that money is evil, for Christ money is a tool through which our desires and loyalties are laid bare. Mammon however, the seeking after wealth, stability, and comfort for our own sake, is evil. Mammon is the fundamental rejection that our lives and our resources are not in fact God's but our own. While it seems easy to say, "Why not buy a bigger, better product?" Or "Why *should* I tithe to the church and to charities?" Such questions lay bare a basic and fundamental rejection of God's lordship of all we have and all we are. Such questions flow, not from a sense of giftedness and bounty, but scarcity and lack. As we continue on our quest to maintain our bottom-line and our so often idolized standard of living, much of the world lives on a dollar or less a day. While we save "our money" out of fear of future financial difficulty refugees in Sudan starve to death. While we choose to not buy energy efficient products because they don't perform like the luxury versions, the ice cap in the Arctic Ocean continues its 30-year trend of shrinking the size of Texas and California combined. While we buy a new gizmo to entertain ourselves, schools in Detroit and throughout our nation crumble. Those who are faithful in a little are faithful in much and vice-versa.

Jesus makes it clear that we are called to give all that we have to the service of God. This is the very definition of stewardship—using our gifts, our resources, and our wealth for God since all these things belong to and flow from God. In the end of the Gospel Jesus

states that our stewardship is measured not only by the monumental decision we make but by our small, day to day decisions. Fred Craddock, noted New Testament theologian puts it this way, “life consists of seemingly small opportunities [to live as good stewards]. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. Most likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor’s cat. ‘Whosoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.’”^[1] In being faithful in the little things we are then faithful in greater things. Through a daily practice of stewardship we grow ever more into the people God calls us to be, and in so doing we find ourselves and others filled with greater and fuller life.

Like the wicked manager in the Gospel we too are faced with a crisis. While our crisis may not be due to an imminent pink-slip due to mismanaging funds, our crisis is even greater. The crisis that confronts us is whether we will be faithful to the message of Jesus Christ. In Christ we, along with the Dohns, along with the saints in ages past and in the present, we are confronted with a choice. Will we live our life, will we use our minds, will we devote our time, will we use our money for the service of God or for the service of self, the service of mammon?

My sisters and brothers as much as our culture would disagree, we cannot serve both God and wealth. We cannot be good stewards and wicked stewards. We cannot be both alive and dead. Christ calls us to use all of our lives, all of our talents in the service of God and neighbor. Christ calls us to a life of joy and meaning. That life may look like the life of a missionary, it may look like the life of a teacher or mother or father. That life may look like the life of a cook, an engineer, or a monk. Being a good steward occurs in as many different ways as there are people in the world.

For Michael and Anita Dohn the choice to use their lives for the service of God no longer even seems like a choice. In following God to the DR they find themselves living a life filled with joy, filled with meaning, filled with blessings even in the midst of so many hardships. For all Christians who follow God, even in the midst of all the challenges that come their way, for those Christians who act as good stewards of the gifts they have been given, there is an incredible reward—life, meaning, joy, purpose, a sense of peace that passes all understanding. While this choice between stewardship and Mammon seems challenging, at the end of the day there really isn’t anything difficult about it. One path leads to emptiness, one to fullness. One path leads to blessings even in the midst of pain, the other path leads to unfulfilled desire. One path leads to life, the other to death. One path leads to a fountain of tears and mourning the other path leads to abundance and joy.

^[1] Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*. John Knox Press, Louisville, KY: 1990, 192.