

Bottom Line on Top

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

September 18, 2022

Luke 16:1-13

I joined you all three years ago this week; I was installed a year ago to the day. A global pandemic notwithstanding, I remain grateful for the call to serve with you all, and to continue to discern together where God is calling us.

Several years ago, I received a grant from the Louisville Institute, an organization supported by the Lilly Endowment. A significant part of that grant was to support visits to congregations, to learn from them, with a particular focus being how they were serving their communities. Then I moved. And then COVID. So I finally did three visits this summer. It will take me a while to process all of the learnings from this experience. Even so, I have assembled a presentation with some reflections that I will share right after church today, in Widener Hall. We will reengineer coffee hour a bit to make that happen. There are sandwiches and chips awaiting – if you plan to stay grab lunch and find a seat. There are still cookies and the like if you stay for a brief while. We will get started as soon as I can get changed and we get the technology going. The quality of the presentation notwithstanding, there are some good things to learn from this experience, and some good questions for us as we consider our ministry here. I hope you can join us, especially as the Eagles don't play until tomorrow evening.

Our daughter works for a law firm in Washington. Her work is to help recruit lawyers to the firm. Like every line of work, they have their own jargon and lingo. In the face of a long meeting, or a lengthy email, they will sometimes say BLUF – B-L-U-F – “bottom line up front.” Or BLOT – B-L-O-T – “bottom line on top.” We've adopted this on our family Zoom calls. If one of us goes on too long – never me! – one of us will say BLOT – bottom line on top. Apart from its directness, it can be an effective strategy, maybe more effective in a law firm than in the family setting, but who knows.

Jesus told a parable to the disciples. It's long, and bit convoluted. One scholar I read remarked that it's almost impossible to nail down a particular interpretation, and I believe that is true. I wish Jesus would have BLOT-ted it, made the bottom line on top, up front. In another parlance, he buries the lead. We will get there as well, but let me bottom line it: He says, simply, to conclude it all, "you cannot serve God and wealth." You cannot serve God and wealth, and then he backfills a parable about stewardship, about managing what is given to us to manage, to make his point.

Regardless of your views on Queen Elizabeth, or Britain, or the monarchy, you no doubt have experienced a great deal of coverage of her death. It's really been quite extraordinary. I don't have much to add except two personal anecdotes.

Several years back, our choir in Rochester travelled to England and Scotland. The first week, we served as the choir in residence at St. Paul's Cathedral, in London. Though the Queen's funeral will be held at Westminster Abbey, services held at St. Paul's have included the funerals of the Duke of Wellington, Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, jubilee celebrations for Queen Victoria; peace services marking the end of the First and Second World Wars; the wedding of Prince (not yet King) Charles and Lady Diana Spencer. Our choir sang each weekday evening for evensong, a simple prayer service with a series of historic sung responses. At St. Paul's, visiting choirs often lead these services, especially in the summer. Our choir did a great job. On about day two, someone in leadership, a verger perhaps, approached me and asked me if I wanted to read a lesson in the service. Our director said that that might happen, but could not be certain. I readily and happily agreed. At the appointed time, the verger and I bowed to one another, and I was escorted to the lectern. I read my lesson and was then escorted back to my seat, and we bowed yet again. That happened four days in a row. You weren't allowed to take pictures; someone snuck a shot anyway, me in my simple black robe, the St. Paul's priests in their Anglican finery. At the end of the week, the cathedral staff had a little reception for us. I spoke briefly to the priest in charge of evensong, who had been with us all week, leading the services. Over tea, I thanked her for her hospitality and for inviting me to participate. Not knowing what to say after that, I remarked: "I love your accent." She paused for a brief moment: "And I love yours."

The Queen died at her home in Balmoral, in Scotland. The monarch is the head of the Church of England, what we on this side of the pond call Episcopal – for having a bishop. The monarch is also called “defender of the faith.” But when the monarch is in Scotland, they are considered to be a member of the Church of Scotland, and technically, are Presbyterian, and technically, are not head of the church because our Scottish cousins insist – as do we – that Jesus is head of the church. So the Queen, having died in Scotland, died a Presbyterian.

You might have noticed the prayer service this past Monday held at St. Giles’ Cathedral in Edinburgh. You might even have watched it. I did. St. Giles’ is technically not a cathedral anymore; the Reformation did away with that status, so it is often called “the high kirk,” or church, of Scotland. If you watched that service, you would have experienced a very Presbyterian affair, simple, dignified, lots of psalms. You would also have noticed the minister of St. Giles’ welcoming the congregation, including the new king, and offering a prayer or two. He is a good friend of mine, Calum MacLeod. We were close colleagues in Chicago. I spoke to him a day or so before the service, wishing him the best and commenting how surreal this all must be. He agreed with that assessment. He comported himself well, and I was glad to know him.

I did notice, however, that at the service at St. Giles’, and the others I watched – lest you worry that I am a closet royalist, I am more of a liturgy geek – the Lord’s Prayer used “trespasses” and trespassers,” rather than our more familiar “debts” and “debtors.” People ask why the differences – the real answer is murky, having to do with Matthew and Luke’s differing versions, different histories of translation, and the like. More recently, a commonly agreed to translation uses “sins” and “sinners,” which is probably truer to the meaning, if not the most precise translation. In almost every other tradition of church you attend in the U.S., you will hear “trespasses,” or perhaps “sins.” Presbyterians say “debts” and “debtors.” Again, the rationale is murky, though I have a friend who says it’s because Presbyterians are much more comfortable talking about money and finances than they are sin. Maybe.

Bottom line on top – you cannot serve God and wealth.

Jesus tells his followers a parable.

There was a rich man who owned property. Someone reported to him that his manager was squandering that property, not getting full value out of it. He is called on the carpet and read the riot act. Show me the money, he is told, or you're out. What will I do? I am not strong enough to dig (that is, no manual labor for him) and I am ashamed to beg. What will I do? So he calls in all of the people who owe the owner money – the debtors, if you will. And he slashes all of the debts so that the owner, the rich man, can receive something, at least, from those who owed him, and so he might have a place to stay if he is fired. This is where it gets curious. The master is pleased with the manager, praising him for his shrewdness and dishonesty. Then Jesus says this: "...make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes..." If that's unclear, Klyne Snodgrass offers this paraphrase: Jesus says, "Put yourself in a good position through the use of your money, which can lead you astray, so that when the age is over God will receive you into God's eternal dwelling." Then this: "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?"

Chelsey Harmon writes that "In alignment with what we read throughout the Scriptures, greed and the love of money can easily corrupt us; Jesus reminds us of this truth, but is also making the point that in this current age, this (money) is also a gift from God meant to be used."

That is to say, whatever the manager's motivations and however questionable his tactics are, he is praised for his shrewdness, for cutting debt, for providing economic relief to those burdened.

Harmon continues: "...in kingdom (of God) economics we share and provide for one another in the spirit of generosity, welcoming and celebrating those who were once on the boundaries of acceptability but whom God has brought in... the hungry who get fed, the naked who are clothed, the prisoners who are visited, the thirsty who are given a drink, the Gentiles and sinners who become part of the community of the righteous. With the future community and kingdom in mind, we live the reality of the kingdom now through our present actions."

Bottom line on top: You cannot serve God and wealth.

What could that look like for us, now?

The college I attended costs more than 10 times now than what it did when I was there, far outpacing rates of inflation. My parents worked hard and saved, and I got scholarships and worked on campus. There were no loans involved, let alone predatory ones. My friend Teri Ott (editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*) writes that “debt forgiveness should not feel unfair to people who claim a Judeo-Christian moral code. Systemic poverty traps people who otherwise could be productive participants in our communities. The freedom of jubilee is freedom for all God’s children; and a flourishing of society as a whole. More is at stake here than money,” she says of the current conversation on debt forgiveness.

What could that look like for us, now?

When in Atlanta, I heard a tremendous sermon by the pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church, Hodari Williams. His bottom line on top was that reparations were entirely in order. His text was Isaiah 58 – “you will be called repairers of the breach.” Something was broken, a flood of iniquity and inequity had happened, and we were called to fix it. This wasn’t about whether we were racist or not, or even if our forebears were slave owners. This was about fixing something that was broken, broken by racism. This also wasn’t about the technical aspects of what reparations looked like. The answer to how is yes, as they say. But it’s clear that much of what is broken has an economic focus to it, and will take money to fix.

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What could that look like for us, now?

You may have read that Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard was donating his entire company to a trust and nonprofit dedicated to fighting climate change, surrendering billionaire status and paying approximately \$17.5 million in taxes in the process. I don’t need any Patagonia gear; nonetheless, I went online and almost bought something. We aren’t Yvon Chouinard, or owners of businesses of that magnitude. Nonetheless, we who have means have means, and how are we called to manage them, be good stewards of them, how are we, to the point, reflecting God’s generosity toward us in our own acts of generosity?

Bob Dylan famously sang “you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

It can be our wealth, our portfolio, our lifestyle, our things. That can lead to temporary, provisional, shallow satisfaction.

Or we can take that same wealth and serve God with it, and those in need who God so loves, the same God whose giving knows no ending, Amen.