

Sunday September 22nd, 2019
14th after Pentecost

PRAYER: O Lord, we have not dealt as faithfully with you as you have with us. We promised to serve no god but you, but we have erected graven images in our hearts, if not on our altars. We vowed to honour your name, but we have taken it in vain. So now we pray that you will grant us the knowledge that there is a balm in Gilead, and also the grace to apply it to ourselves.

Teach us to live in faith, Lord. Make us sure of your love for us, make us unwavering in our love for you. Then, when we stumble upon the road, we will have the will to get up against and continue our journey toward the rising sun. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and given us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Let us give praise to God, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

STEWARDSHIP: “Give us, Lord, the grace of giving
with a spirit wide and free
That ourselves and all our living,
We may offer unto thee.”

PASTORAL PRAYER: O dear God, you are the healing cream for our battered souls: he our prayers. The very soul of this world is weary, and in need of your healing mercy. Its past is a heavy burden on our shoulders; its present experience is a stumbling block for our feet; its tomorrow is lost in a vast maze of shifting values and priorities, for which we can find no map. Everything is shifting beneath us, changing so fast that the very earth trembles. We find ourselves losing our footing and falling, only to be dragged along by forces we cannot control nor understand nor will let us go. We are frightened, Lord. Frightened by what is happening, what it all means and what will become of us. Sometimes we feel so weak and helpless; sometimes we feel angry and powerless. So, we have returned to you, the Faithful One, the one in which there is no shadow of turning or change. We have returned to you who is our source of help and we ask for courage and we seek from you, wisdom.

O Lord, how we need your prophetic voice today. The very spirit of this world is torn, and in need of mending. Its lands are filled with war and injustice; its peoples are divided by colour, creed, class and culture. The world's unity has been ripped into a tattered shred, and we can find no pattern in which to mend it. Everything it seems is straining, pulling apart so hard that the very fabric of hope is in danger of tearing. O God, how we yearn for a word from you; for sometimes we feel ignorant, foolish even. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed and defenseless. So, we have returned to you, the Faithful One, our Voice in time of trouble. We return to you and ask for judgment and we ask for clarity.

O God, you are the inner moving of the heart: hear our plea. The heart of the world is indifferent, needing your stimulation. Its eyes refuse to look upon the suffering; its ears refuse to listen to the abused; its lips speak out for the oppressed. Everything is numb, paralyzed so deeply that the very earth sleeps. Stir us awake, Lord. Sometimes we feel dead and listless; sometimes we feel cut off and hopeless. So, we have returned to you, the Faithful One, our Inspiration in time of trouble.

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We return to you and ask for revival and we ask for resurrection.

O God you are the thoughts of the mind: hear our thanksgiving! The mind of the world is confusing, needing your counsel, and we trust that you will grant understanding. If its intentions are not honourable; if its ambitions are not just; if its aspirations are not fair; if everything is muddled, so clouded that the very earth doubts it is turning on its axis, we believe that you will make things plain. If we feel bewildered and aimless; if we feel defeated and hapless, you will give direction. For this we have returned to you, the Faithful One, our Hope in time of trouble. We have returned to ask for your salvation; we have returned to ask for your presence; and we know we shall receive.

BENEDICTION: “May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, equip you with all you need for doing his will. May he produce in you, through the power of Jesus Christ all that is pleasing to him. Jesus is the great Shepherd of the sheep by the sheep by an everlasting covenant, signed with his blood. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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Luke 16:1-13

“Giving an Accounting”

A good-looking society woman was invited to an expensive fund-raising dinner in New York City. She was seated next to a wealthy lawyer. During the meal, they had a chance to get to know each other and were having a good time. When the meal was finished, the lawyer leaned over and asked the woman if she would spend the night with him for \$10,000. The woman blushed but said she would.

The man then asked if she would spend the night for \$10. The woman was shocked and said, “What kind of a woman do you think I am?” The man responded, “My dear, we have already established that. Now we are merely deciding on the price.” What is your price? What would it take for you to sell out? Sell out your principles, your traditions or your relationships? We already know the nature of who we are, and that we are prone to sinful behaviour; the only question is what our price to compromise is?

In the book, “America Told the Truth”, people were surveyed and asked what they would be willing to do for ten million dollars. The responses are pretty revealing. 25% would abandon their entire family. 25% would abandon their church. 23% would become a prostitute for a week. 16% would give up their citizenship. 16% would leave their spouse. 10% would withhold testimony at a trial and let a murderer go free. 7% would kill a complete stranger and 3% would give up their own children for adoption.

What is your integrity worth? In terms of how we live our lives, are we simply negotiating the price of compromise? Then again maybe we need to ask just what integrity is and is not. Integrity comes from the Latin word *integritas* and it means “wholeness”, “entireness”, and “completeness”. The root word is *integer*, which means “untouched”, “intact”, and “entire”.

Integrity is to: a person’s, institutions, or also to a corporations’ character what health is to our bodies, and 20/20 vision is to our eyes. A person without integrity is not divided because that is duplicity, and they are not pretending because that is hypocrisy. People who have integrity are whole, have nothing to hide and their lives are harmonious. In the end, God is always seeking to put things together and keep from breaking things apart.

The very motto of the McMaster Divinity College where I went to seminary has as its motto a verse that recognizes God’s desire to hold things together in Christ. Colossians 1:17 reads, “He (meaning Christ) existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together.” To God life is to be an integer, to be whole not a fraction or a shattered group of pieces.

In today’s Gospel lesson about integrity, Jesus tells a very interesting and difficult parable to interpret, about a manager of a large land holding who is having a very bad day. After he was hired, it wasn’t long before rumours began to circulate among the other staff and perhaps the neighbours, that this manager, or steward, was thoroughly dishonest.

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It is clearly implied that this manager was “cooking the books”, or embezzling funds from his employer. The employer called the manager into the office outraged at the betrayal. The manager is then ordered to get his books together for an audit, and because the employer is sure the manager is guilty, he is going to fire the manager. The manager is terrified, not of his employer, oddly enough, but for his own situation. What is he going to do to survive? He does a quick personal inventory of his skills, and soon realizes that he is not cut out for physical labour.

He is a man who has managed, handled reports, and told others what to do, but has no calluses on his own hands. Furthermore, he concludes that he is too proud to beg, which lets us know that he thought of himself as being someone of a higher status than others. The point I should make right off the top is that this man is guilty. The rumours are true; the man has been stealing from his employer. So, what is he to do?

Suddenly the manager has a brilliant idea. He goes to other business people who are indebted to his employer and amends their bills. For example, he tells one man who owes 100 jars of oil to tear up his bill and make it out for fifty. He goes to another who owes 1,000 bushels of wheat and tells him to tear up the bill and make it out for 800.

How do you think these two men would feel about the manager, now that he had radically reduced their debt? That’s right, they would love this guy. I mean who among us wouldn’t love to have the bank call up tomorrow and tell us that our mortgage has been cut in half? These folks who had their debt amended wouldn’t care what the man did to his employer. All they care about is that they personally benefited.

The manager changed the bills for a strategic reason. He did it so that when he is thrown out of his employer’s presence, he would have these two men to fall back on. They would be so grateful for what he did, they will agree to take him in and care for him. Now the part of the parable that is a bit confusing to us is the reaction of the employer. Instead of going ballistic and raining revenge on the manager, he actually praises him for being shrewd.

It is very hard for us to understand the employer’s response. Why didn’t he have the manager arrested, draw and quartered, and publicly humiliated for what he did? It all has to do with shrewdness or street smarts. Because he was a manager, the man knew the inside dirt on his employer’s contracts. The manager, it now appears, wasn’t the only one cooking the books.

Like all good Jewish men, the manager knew that in Judaism, it was against the Law of Moses to charge interest on loaned amounts to others, so to get around the prohibition against interest, many business people would loan 50 units of wheat but make the paper out to read 75 for example. It was a common tactic and one Jesus audience knew well. By having the employer’s clients and debtors rewrite their bills, he is in fact asking them to write off the interest that isn’t supposed to be there in the first place.

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The manager knew that if the employer made a fuss, he would have to admit he charged interest, and that would bring dishonour on him and bring him into conflict with the religious authorities. His own wealth and business would be jeopardized, so he has to let it go. This whole parable reminds me of the very powerful movie, *The Shawshank Redemption* which is really worth having a look at to see how people and money are manipulated.

The manager in the parable is indeed brilliant. He knows how the world of finance and contracts works. He knows the power of money and how to use it to influence people and make friends. Jesus goes on to say that not only is this manager a shrewd user of worldly resources, but it seems that Jesus thinks that all of us have also learned ways of being shrewd in dealing with money or worldly things.

Most people I know, with some exceptions, are pretty knowledgeable about our personal finances. We know how to shop for the best interest rates, both in borrowing and saving. We pay attention to our mutual funds, pension reports, and personal holdings: to make sure we are progressing forward in our accumulation of resources. We shop with great diligence for the very best price we can get on just about everything.

For example, I know my grandfather some years ago, was not alone in driving all over Brantford, burning fuel, to save ten cents on a bag of milk. We love a bargain, and if you don't believe me, just go to one of those manufacturer's clearance sales they hold from time to time and see how people are in a near frenzy to get that special bargain.

We have all seen those news feeds at a Boxing Day sales events where people are in an absolute frenzy over a bin of cheap goods. I saw one incident where discounted shoes were flying all over the place and people were so intent on grabbing bargains, that the store manager could stand there and lob shoes that had been thrown to the floor off people's heads. The shoppers were so focused on finding the bargains they didn't even notice that running shoes were bouncing off their noggins.

We become so intent and focused on the specials, bargains, and deals: that we can't see anything else. Let us be honest with ourselves; if nothing else we are shrewd with worldly wealth. For the most part, we know what we are doing, although recent statistics about the out of control debt that Canadians are accumulating is troubling.

In fact, we are so good at knowing our money, I bet I could ask you how much is in your purse or wallet right now and most of you would know the amount to within a dollar or two. Our shrewdness though can get carried away, and like the unfaithful manager we can compromise ourselves into taking advantage of opportunities to line our own pockets at the expense of our integrity. Just think of what became of Conrad Black.

In January 2004, Reader's Digest surveyed twenty-six hundred readers about their level of honesty and the results are disturbing to say the least. Some of the responses include the fact that 63% of respondents have called in sick to work when they are not ill. 63% have taken supplies from the company for personal use.

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16% have taken something valuable from their employer for personal use. 17% have “cheated” on their income tax forms by not declaring income. 18% have lied on a resume/job application. 32 % have lied to their spouse about the cost of a recent purchase and 28% have lied to their spouse or partner about a relationship with another person. Jesus goes on to say that we may be shrewd, but that doesn’t mean we have integrity. Even if we cheat in little things, we are still cheaters.

What Jesus is driving at, is this; why are we so motivated, educated, and prepared to do almost anything to make a dollar, and so thoroughly unprepared to be shrewd in heavenly matters? In the accounting of our spiritual books, what treasures have we stored up in heaven? I must be careful here in making sure you don’t leave today and think Jesus is saying you can earn your way to heaven because you cannot.

Salvation is a gift; you cannot earn it. Jesus isn’t talking about doing great things here on earth so that heaven’s door is opened a little wider for us. What Jesus is saying is that as the dishonest steward was shrewd in making friends on earth with money, are we making friends with our resources? Friends who we will greet us when we get to heaven? It is all about integrity. It is all about not being divided in our loyalties.

It is as Socrates said, “The greatest way to live with honour in this world is to be what we pretend to be.” It isn’t easy though, is it? Ronald Rolheiser in his book, *The Holy Longing* wrote about this dilemma we find ourselves in.

We want to be a saint, but we also want to feel every sensation experienced by sinners; we want to be innocent and pure, but we also want to be experienced and taste all of life; we want to serve the poor and have a simple lifestyle, but we also want all the comforts of the rich; we want to have the depth afforded by solitude, but we also don’t want to miss anything; we want to pray, but we also want to watch television, read, talk to friends, and go out. It’s a small wonder that life is often a trying enterprise, and that we are often tired and pathologically overextended.

The truth is that despite our best intentions, we are by definition, more worldly than heavenly. We are also exhausted trying to do the impossible by serving two masters. And in doing so we are finding ourselves hating, either God because we believe his demands are unrealistic on us, or we hate the world for dragging us away from spiritual matters. The reality is that the only thing that happens when we try to sit on the fence, is we get a sore bottom. It is time for us to face the consequences of our divided hearts.

The reaction to Jesus’ parable and comments are not that foreign to us. The Pharisees, listening to this parable, who dearly loved their money, scoffed at Jesus. In essence they said Jesus didn’t know what he was talking about. So, Jesus chastises them by pointing out that they love the public perception that they are truly godly people, but their hearts, which secretly love money, are an abomination to God.

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I know the temptation all too well to want to preserve a public perception that I am truly spiritual, well at the same time I am pulled into worldly interests and pursuits. Perhaps we all know this temptation intimately. Who are we serving? In the parable, who was the manager truly serving? If you answered that he served himself, you would be correct. Selfish ambition, money and influence were his masters; and he served them shrewdly.

Who are we serving? What gains your undivided attention? What use does your resources get applied to? Where are you making friends? Are you truly devoted to God or are you suffering from the pathology of a divided heart? Have you a sore bottom from trying to sit on the fence too long? Have you recently spent as much energy in serving Christ as you have in trying to find the next bargain?

Peter T. Forsythe makes a great point when he writes, “The first duty of every soul is to find not its freedom but its master.” (Positive Preacher and the Modern Mind-Pg. 28)

Who is your master? Whose interest and commands are you living to fulfill? Where does your security come from? The reality is that we make money out to be the most important thing in our lives to the expense of what really matters. On June 14 in the year 2000 the New York Times reported the following incident:

J.P. Morgan & Company, a bank worth \$21 billion was disconnected from the internet on June 13, 2000 for failure to pay a \$35 bill. The venerable Wall Street firm found itself without a web site or an email connection to the outside world because it had failed to renew the registration of www.jpmorgan.com, the domain name that serves as its address on the World Wide Web. Throughout the day, clients were unable to visit the website or exchange email messages with the firm’s bankers and traders.

All that frustration could have been averted if Morgan had sent a check for \$35 for the annual registration fee to Network Solutions, a domain name registrar in Herndon, Virginia. It pulled the plug on Morgan six weeks after Morgan’s bill came due and after sending the firm at least three bills, said Chris Clough, vice president for corporate communications at Network solutions.

Are you connected to the essential, necessary, life affirming part of your life? You may have quite an extensive portfolio and can easily live “high on the hog”, but without being shrewd in heavenly matters you have nothing. “What does it profit a person if they gain the whole world but forfeit their soul?” If we want to avoid a really bad day when we are called on to give an account of our lives, then we must show we are faithful in the things that really matter.

“No one can serve two masters.” It is time for all of us to decide who we serve.