

“LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE”

Luke 16:1-13 November 10, 2019

When I’ve been reading to the Kinderboost students we’ve had discussions about fall and I introduced the word “autumn” into their vocabulary with one of the picture books. I found a poem titled “November” in an the old Ideals on our library shelves. It was written by Minnie Klemme and it goes like this:

November, by Minnie Klemme

*November marks the falling leaves,
The fodder cut and bound in sheaves,
The acorns falling to the ground,
Pheasants making “caution” sounds,
A hunter’s moon across the sky,
And wild geese up flying high.*

*The squirrels in the leafy towers,
All snug against November showers,
When the rain turns sleet and sleet turns snow—
That is the way the seasons go.
With winter weather on the way,
There still remains Thanksgiving Day.*

*November saves the best till last,
It is our nations’ famed repast,
And fields and woods and leaf and tree
All join in the festivity.*

This morning we continue with our Fall Sermon Series: What Disciples Do. The scripture reading of Luke 16:1-3 leads us into the topic “Disciples Resist Greed” and looking at the big picture. As we are in the midst of our Stewardship/Visioning campaign, this Sunday and next we will focus on practicing generosity and how that looks in our own lives. Today the theme is Love God more than money and next Sunday it will be Practice generous financial stewardship. Then on the 24th, Thanksgiving Sunday we will dedicate our pledges.

Mark Twain once said, “It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”

That quote is especially pertinent to today’s text. Luke 16:1-13 is extraordinarily difficult to understand. Various interpretations exist, and you can read them in almost any commentary. Some interpreters believe the manager cheated his master by discounting the debts. Others say the manager simply reduced interest payments that were not allowed by Jewish laws; therefore he did nothing inappropriate. The text is not clear. However, the parable’s conclusion in verse 13 is *not* difficult to understand. Jesus says we cannot love God and money at the same time.

Why does Jesus condemn materialism so harshly? Many reasons can be given. For example, when money is given first place in our lives, we are guilty of practicing idolatry, placing things about God. When we prioritize material possessions, we also do great damage to God’s creation. And when we love money more that God, ultimately we waste our lives in a worthless pursuit to accumulate more and more stuff—stuff we think we need but that ultimately becomes a burden and is thrown away.

There is an old Indian parable about a guru who had a star disciple. He was so pleased with the man’s spiritual progress that he left him on his own. The

disciple lived in a little mud hut. His only clothing was a loincloth, a small covering around his midsection. He lived simply, begging for his food. Each week, the disciple washed his loin cloth and hung it out to dry. One day he came back to discover the loincloth torn and eaten by rats. He begged the villagers for another loincloth, and they gave it to him. But the rats ate that one too. So he got himself a cat.

That took care of the rats, but now, when he begged for his food, he had to beg for milk for his cat. So he got a cow to feed his cat, but now he had to beg for hay to feed his cow. So, in order to feed his cow, he decided to till and plant the ground around his hut. But soon he found no time for contemplation, so he hired servants to tend his farm.

Over seeing the laborers became a chore, so he got married to have a wife to help him with the farm. His wife didn't like the mud hut he lived in and demanded a real house. So the man had to grow even more crops and hire more servants to keep his wife happy. In time, the disciple became the wealthiest man in the village.

Years later this man's guru was traveling nearby, so he stopped in to see his old student. He was shocked at what he saw. Where once stood a simple mud hut, there now loomed a palace surrounded by a vast estate worked by many servants. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked his disciple. "You won't believe this, sir," the disciple replied. "But there was no other way I could keep my loincloth."

It's easy to get sucked into a materialistic lifestyle of accumulation. But making the accumulation of stuff the center of our life is cancer to our soul. As Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Obviously, all of us need at least some possessions. But we must never make them the focus of our lives.

Perhaps the agitation of Jesus Christ to you and me almost at every turn is to discern deeply who you are and what you are supposed to be doing. If it were all taken away, what would you do, who would you be, where would you go? Part of the kingdom is not about having comfort and wealth. It is about transformation and radical re-alignment, not just conforming with what everybody does. The gospel is not about comfort. And that is tremendously challenging to me, isn't it to you?

So get clear about your self-interest and be shrewd as the manager was in this parable---look at the big picture and where you are in it and do what has to be done. For the most part Christians can be too passive when our goal is to be good and proper, and not overstep the boundaries lest we anger God, or make others uncomfortable. We want to follow the rules and make sure we don't make mistakes. But is that the goal of the kingdom?

Remember Soren Kierkegaard's "Duck story?" The ducks waddled to church---a duck church to hear their pastor---a duck pastor---read from the Bible---a duck Bible---and sing duck songs. The duck preacher got up to preach to the ducks and spoke to the ducks---"You ducks waddled to church. But you have wings, you were made to fly, to soar to the heavens, no limits to your soaring and flying, nothing can stop you. So fly and claim your identity." And the ducks at the conclusion of the sermon all proclaimed "Amen" and then went and waddled home.

As I have mentioned previously, I spent the summer in discernment about what we might be challenged to do as disciples for our stewardship campaign and our visioning for the future of this Pine Bluffs UMC Family of Faith, Body of Christ. I was led to this image I have shared with you of "Heart-Centered Discipleship." As the finance committee and I wrote our letter for the fund-raising campaign we tried to express some of where we were coming from this year.

We quoted from Henri J.M. Nouwen's [A Spirituality of Fundraising](#): "From the perspective of the gospel, fundraising is not a response to a crisis. Fund-raising is, first and foremost, a form of ministry. It is a way of announcing

our vision and inviting other people into our mission. Vision and mission are so central to the life of God's people that without vision we perish and without mission we lose our way. Vision brings together needs and resources to meet those needs. Vision also shows us new directions and opportunities for our mission."

Someone recently asked me why there wasn't a dollar amount on the pledge letter and was quite confused about that lapse. Our response is that of course we are encouraging you to continue your weekly or monthly contributions to the functioning of this church body. Perhaps you have been stuck on a plateau of giving and it's time to be bumped off to give more deliberately or sacrificially? Have you always hoped to actually pay a tithe of your income? Is this the year for you to commit to do that? What about your contributions to the work of the kingdom can be enhanced by a deeper sense of the Holy Spirit working in your heart?

"We are all blessed simply to exist, and we are all called to be a blessing for others. But when we consider the word *blessing*, we usually think of what we say before a meal, the good things we receive in life, or the words at the end of a church service or wedding. Henri invites us to shift our understanding of the word *blessing* from a noun to a verb. To bless others, we must allow love to flow out of our lives and into the lives of others and into our communities. This flow of love allows us and others to recognize and acknowledge God's presence in our lives, both in weakness and in strength, in times of plenty and in time of poverty."

Does this seem as if it would be a portion of "Heart-Centered Discipleship" to you? Would our financial giving be a part of being faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ? We are looking at the "big picture" here, friends! We are asked to "Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly before our God." So yes, of course God desires good behavior but so much more is available to us as blessings as we grow in our discipleship, as we mature as Christians—acknowledging God's presence in our lives and how we can be ever closer to Him. We invite you to look for how He is calling you to faithfulness and love in your personal life. May we be open to His will, His guidance and His abundant love and mercy for us. Amen and amen.