

Open our ears, Lord, to hear your Word, and our lips to speak it true. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Being the child of a Methodist minister, I have heard many sermons about today's Gospel lesson. All of them have had as their thesis something like this: "Jesus tells us today that we are not to worry about anything, that we are to cast our cares upon him, and he will take care of us. Trust in God and God will provide us with what we need." Some of these sermons have even had fancy titles, like, "How to Win over Worry," or "Worry Makes Us Miss the Point in Life," or "Cast your Cares upon Jesus."

There is nothing wrong with these kinds of sermons, as far as they go. However, I have always thought that those who preach about worry in response to today's Gospel lesson either intentionally or subconsciously miss the point of the only sermon we know that Jesus preached. Today's Gospel lesson is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the point that Jesus was making has to do with possessions: money, wealth. What Jesus said, point-blank, is that we "cannot serve [both] God and wealth." We have to choose which one will be our master.

Notice that **Jesus** did not say that we couldn't have money; we just have to choose whether we will serve money or whether we will serve God.

I have always felt a bit superior to the Methodists for their willful deafness about this passage. Surely we Episcopalians, we who so value thinking and intellectualizing about scripture, surely we would get Jesus' point, right? So imagine my astonishment this past week as I read the lessons for today, all selected to compliment the Gospel lesson, and discovered that their theme was not money, but worry. Today's Collect ties these lessons together in a theme of "don't worry, be thankful:"

Most loving Father, [our Collect today says] whose will it is for us to give thanks for all things, to **fear** nothing but the loss of you, and to **cast all our care** on you who care for us: Preserve us from **faithless fears** and **worldly anxieties**, that... [Yada, yada, yada.]. Amen.

To use a phrase that Cuba Gooding once made famous in the movie *Jerry Maguire*, I want to yell, "Show me the money!" Let's hear about money!

Of course, now that I am the preacher, I see why people duck the money topic. In the first place, money is a hard topic to talk about. If my father had had talked about money in a sermon, for example, I know what his parishioners would have said. They would have said, “Now you’ve stopped preaching and have gone to meddling!” I have heard them say this, and I have heard it said, “My money is between me and God.” The second reason why preachers duck the money topic is, as we have been hearing for the past several weeks, we know that we cannot live up to Jesus’ standards about ... well, everything—at least by ourselves—but we especially can’t live up to Jesus’ standards about money.

No, Jesus didn’t say that we couldn’t **have** money. But he warns us **about** money. Just a few verses before our Gospel lesson today, in Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus said:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on the earth.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

We will hear **THIS** lesson again on Ash Wednesday, where it is used to remind us that our mortality should cause us to examine how we live our lives. The Ash Wednesday lesson reminds us that our lives here on earth are **not** supposed to be about accumulating money and wealth and power, but rather preparing ourselves for life eternal after we die. In a sense, our money **IS** between us and God, but not in the way that we might think. Our money is not a private matter for just us and God to work out—our money is not between us and God in this way—but money does **literally** stand between us and God. Money gets in the way of our relationship with God.

This is Jesus’ point in our Gospel lesson today. We need money to live, but we are not to spend our lives trying to accumulate more money than everyone else has. We need money to live, but God will provide. We need money to live, but God does provide! I read somewhere that if we don’t have money we worry about how to get it, and if we **DO** have money, we either worry about losing it or we worry that what we have won’t be enough.

For example, let’s imagine a man who has a lot of money. I am going to make such a man up. Let’s call him Richard. We would only know that Richard has a lot of money if he talked about his money all the time. He might things like, “I wish I could afford a Lamborghini, you know, the new

Aventador LP 700-4 model, which has a 700-horsepower V12 engine that hits 60 miles per hour in under three seconds, but I only have a couple of million.” Now if we knew someone like this, someone who said such a thing, we might check on the Web and discover that the Aventador will soon go on the market—just this week, in fact—for only \$370,000. And if we were to ask a man such as our imaginary Richard why he didn't buy this car that he wanted he might said something like, “\$370,000 here, and \$370,000 there, and before you know it I'd be broke.” Maybe you know someone like this. If we don't have money we worry about how to get it, and if we DO have money, we either worry about losing it or we worry that what we have won't be enough.

Jesus did not say that we cannot have money, just that we should not let money be our master. Jesus tells us that we should not replace our love of God with a love of money or a love of the things which money can buy. Jesus tells us that we should not replace our fear of God with a fear of losing our money.

The question that I have for you today, is this: What do you think that people will remember about you after you die? What do you *want* people to remember about you? Will it be that you were rich? Will it be that you drove a great car, a fast car? Perhaps Richard's tombstone should read, “He drove a Lexus, but he wanted a Lamborghini.” Perhaps that is better than, “He had a lot of money, but it wasn't enough.” Perhaps even THAT is far better than, “He ran a white-collar sweatshop.”

Have you ever thought about what the legacy of your life will be? About what you want your legacy to be? A few years ago I did, and what I discovered was that I can be far more miserly with the money I have accumulated than **anyone** I actually know who is genuinely cash-rich. I was in danger of my legacy being, “She begrudged every cent she gave so that what she gave was not charity!”

I am telling you this story to be brutally honest about the contest between whether to let the love of money or the love of God be the goal of my life. What I have discovered since entering seminary

is that being cash-poor is no guarantor of having the right attitude towards money. So I am not claiming to have all the answers; instead, I am just sharing what I have learned from the struggle:

First, we owe God thanks and praise for life itself. Our lives do not belong to us, our lives belong to God. Having money is optional, an extra.

Second, if God gives us money, we should be grateful for the gift. Even though we all work hard for our money, our money does not really belong to us, it belongs to God. There is no such thing as “my money.” Money might be in my pocket or in my bank account, available for my use, but “my money” actually belongs to God, not me. And the best way to remember that God owns all “my” money is to regularly give back to God of what God has given to me. Not just during stewardship season, but the whole year through.

Third, if we should ever try to determine how much we are worth, the best way to do this totally worthless endeavor is to determine how much money we have spent, and on what, rather than how much money we are saving—how much we might be hoarding. How we spend the money that God has given to us tells far more about us than how much money we have managed to accumulate.

Finally, we need to remember that money itself is not the problem, but our attitude towards money is the issue.

For example, let's imagine a man who has a lot of money. I am going to make such a man up. Let's call him Richard. He's very rich because God seems to bless everything that he does. He works hard, but his work does not define him. He is very successful; work just seems to turn to money in his hands. He has many employees who love to work for him because he values them individually for their contribution to their shared endeavor. This Richard has a family who loves to spend time with him, and he with them. They all attend church every week. And as a family they are planning how to give the rest of Richard's money away. Their dream is to build a half-way house where women who have been incarcerated can live while they find work without having to go back to the same bad situations which landed them in prison in the first place. Richard wants his legacy to be, “He built a safe place for women.”

Which of our two imaginary Richards best describes you? If you are like most people, you are somewhere in between. Perhaps I should have entitled this sermon, “How to Win over Money” or “Money Makes Us Miss the Point in Life,” or even “Cast your Cash upon Jesus.” But I didn’t. That is because what you do with the money that God has given to you is literally between you and God—a matter for the two of you to decide. Jesus didn’t say that we couldn’t have money, but he suggests that we need to account for the money that God has lent to us. So, too, we need to account for the life that God has lent to us. Jesus didn’t say that we couldn’t have money, just that we should not let money come between us and God.

This prayer from Proverbs chapter 30 seems like the right place to end today:

⁷Two things I ask of you [O God];
do not deny them to me before I die:
⁸Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that I need,
⁹or I shall be full, and deny you,
and say, “Who is the Lord?”
or I shall be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.