

*You cannot serve God and wealth.  
(Luke 16:13)*

For those of you who don't know me, I'm Bob Morrison. My parents, one Episcopalian and one a Methodist, settled on a church just before their first child was born. They chose St. John's, where they remained members all their lives. They – and therefore Frank, Norwood and I – rarely missed a Sunday. After years away at college, then army, I came back to Lynchburg for a year. That's when the seminary bug bit, and St. John's sponsored me for ordination. Over the 40-some years since then, my wife Julie and I have worshipped here many times. In retirement, back in our hometown, we are delighted to make St. John's our church home.

One of my fondest St. John's memories is of the 1950-51 fourth grade boys Sunday school class, taught by Lisa Hancock's father Ernie Wood. As was typical, class attendance started strong, then dropped off. But our teacher was resourceful. When attendance got its lowest, he would put us in his car and take us for ice cream. Once, I think, we even went to the Quality Dairy, and believe you me, well before Dairy Queens or Frosties had been thought of, this was a huge treat! Word would get around. The next Sunday the class would be full of boys begging Mr. Wood to take us for ice cream this Sunday. They had to know that he would not – not until attendance got way down again. But you can't blame them for trying.

I've thought of this many times, but not until a few days ago did I make a connection between those trips for ice cream and today's gospel reading. Unlike the manager in the story, Ernie Wood was in no way dishonest. But like that manager, he was clever. He was shrewd. Unlike the manager, our teacher was not stealing his boss' money to curry favor. He was using his own. But like the manager, whose deal-cutting proved profitable for his boss, Ernie Wood was not above using bribery to attract more kids to Sunday school, where we could learn about God, our eternal home. So if Jesus can use the dishonest manager as a positive example to encourage his followers to use both wealth and ingenuity in his service, those trips for ice cream just may have been divinely inspired!

Using wealth in God's service is one thing, but devoting one's life to wealth is another. About this we hear stark words this morning: "*You cannot serve God and wealth.*" You can serve one or the other but not both. For devoting one's life to God, rather than wealth – to using wealth in God's service – we often use the word stewardship. In older translation, the manager is called steward, which means the same thing. As a steward, or manager, you manage wealth, but the wealth you manage is not yours. In your wealth management, you are accountable to a higher authority.

Stewardship of God's abundance is not about just money. It's about everything. It's about time, talent and treasure. It's about family and all other relationships. It's about neighborhood, community, and world. It's about personal health and wholeness. It's about everything. It's about helping out, anywhere and everywhere, seeing all of earthly life as one not-so-long mission trip. In marriage, one promises in the name of God to honor another "with all that I am and all that I have." All that I am, all that I have: that's what stewardship covers.

Stewardship is therefore about so much more than tangible wealth, than money and what it buys, but stewardship does include money – all money. Concerning every dollar we earn, spend, save or give away for purposes beyond our households, we're to be managers – wealth managers for God of the marvelous profusion that is God's creation. Stewardship is therefore about budgets and bank accounts, about capital formation and investing at home, at work, at church, and anywhere else. It's about repairing roofs that leak in our houses, the office, St. John's and Mexico. It's about putting food on the table for our families and employees, making sure Diane and Bill can do the same, and helping provide for people throughout the world who go to bed hungry every night.

For a long time it was fine with me that my concept of Christian living included a standard of monetary generosity so low that it could be met with little sacrifice. When the stewardship bug was about to bite, I was serving St. James, Roanoke, a small church with a small budget. Julie was home with our young children. Our one salary, well within the top 10% of incomes among the world's population, seemed to us very modest. For what we thought we needed, we had to scrimp. Each fall we squeezed a very small pledge into our family budget, and that was that.

But like Diane this month, I was the only parish priest. That meant preaching nearly every Sunday. And that meant becoming acutely aware that about every third Sunday, in the gospel reading, Jesus would be talking about money. Again! About Zacchaeus, the hated tax collector who like the others would skim a whole lot off the top before passing his collections on to Rome; Zacchaeus, the short little man up in a tree wanting to see Jesus, whom Jesus sees and befriends; Zacchaeus, who then gives away half his wealth and repays four times over the many people he's ripped off, doing so not to earn God's favor but as a result a gift of grace, of our Lord loving Zacchaeus just as he was before he gave away the first shekel. About the poor widow with only two coins, putting them both in the collection plate: her substance, not just her leftovers. About his disciples – about us! – to whom God is giving his kingdom, who are to sell our possessions, give charitably and generously, and make purses for heavenly rather than earthly treasure. If you're in church often, you know as I do that such gospel readings keep coming. In the Episcopal Church, we challenge ourselves to "Strive to Tithe," but you know how abundantly clear is Jesus' teaching: that tithing – the ongoing giving away of at least 10% of one's income – is just a beginning. For Jesus, a life of faithful stewardship includes tithing but so much more.

As I've heard all those gospel readings on money and monetary giving, and as the Spirit has spoken to my mind and heart through them, it has been hard for me to hear them as gospel, as good news. But there is one stewardship passage that I've come to treasure especially, one that helps me hear differently. It's in Matthew's gospel where, along with today's admonition to serve God, not wealth, Jesus goes on to contrast anxiety and faith. With faith in God we are not to be anxious, he says, not even about our most basic needs – what we'll eat, what we'll wear – not even about those 401(k)s we're counting on for our later years, not even after a huge recession. God so beautifully clothes the lilies of the field, here today and gone tomorrow, Christ says. "So don't you know that God will much more clothe you — you of little faith?" At its heart, stewardship is about that deepest of spiritual realities, our relationship with God. It's about faith, not fear. It's about faith in God, who loves us and cares for us.

Even with the most confident trust in God's never-failing care and love, we continue to use our God-given minds. We analyze needs and set priorities. We save for the future and rainy days. We make budgets. Knowing bad things happen even to the best of people, we buy insurance policies. But we don't worship money. We don't count on wealth to save us from all ills. We don't let our desire for all the financial security and niceties money can buy override our God-given need to give. Instead we trust and at times experience God's total loving care for us, for each of us – care provided in the deepest, most intimate, most personal, most pervasive ways imaginable and far beyond all imagining.

For years I wished for the generosity bar to be set lower. But not any longer, even though my reach still far exceeds my grasp. I give thanks for the challenge of faithful stewardship. It has been for me a place of grace. And I suspect each of us has some area of life, as use of money has been for me, where we come face to face with God in our need for God, who so loves us just as we are yet too much to let us stay that way; where the merciful Spirit breathes into us perseverance; where we learn the goodness of true sacrifice, of giving up something good for something better; where we begin to taste the joy, the blessedness, the bliss of true worship with our lips and in our lives; where, however tentatively and haltingly, we walk with God who forever walks with us; where, as we are able, we accept that we are accepted, trust that we are so well-cared for, allow Christ to clothe us in his goodness more and more, and pray the Spirit to lead us towards God's glorious future, where pure generosity is all there is and all we are.

For such amazing grace, thanks be to God – and God alone!