

August 11, 2019

Luke 12:32-40

Pastor Lauren Eanes

“Dry Wallets”

The story is told of the ancient Gauls. The Gauls were a warlike people who inhabited what is now France and Belgium. They spoke a Celtic language and were Druidic by religion. By the time of the Christian era they had been conquered by the Roman Empire and were supposedly under its control. But the Gauls didn't particularly like being conquered and there were numerous Gallic uprisings.

Eventually some Christian missionaries ventured into Gallic territory and some Gauls did indeed convert to Christianity. But they had this weird custom. Whenever a converted warrior was baptized in a river, he would hold one arm high in the air as the missionary dunked him under the water. The missionaries could not figure out what this was all about.

Well, the reason for a hand being kept dry during baptism soon became clear. When the next battle broke out, the warlike Gaul would proclaim “This arm is not baptized!”, grab his club or sword, and ride off to destroy his enemy in a most un-Christianlike manner.

I share this story not because it is historically accurate, because it's probably not, and not to give a bad impression of the Gauls or their descendants. But I love this story because of the image it gives us: this idea that someone could try to keep one part of their body, one aspect of their identity, free from the influence of baptism.

It invites us to consider: what aspect of our lives and our identities do we try to keep dry? Are there things that we try to keep from getting wet in the baptismal waters, try to cordon off from the rest of our lives of faith? What is it that we clutch in our outstretched arm while we go under the water?

I think, if we're honest, what all too many of us clutch is not a sword or an ax, but our wallet.¹

Oh, preacher, don't go there! If you want to talk about discipleship, talk about Bible study and service projects. Challenge me in my prayer life, or Sunday school attendance, but don't challenge my checkbook. Talk about politics if you must, even about sex, but the ways I acquire and spend and save and give money are private!

For many of us, talking about money in church makes us deeply uncomfortable. And often for good reason: we've all seen and heard pastors who misuse the good news of Jesus to line their own pockets and fund their private jets and mansions. Money can feel like a tool for manipulation or coercion.

And yet I suspect that for most of us, that's not the main reason we get uncomfortable. I suspect it's because we've heard about what Jesus has to say about money, and we worry that what we're doing with our wealth isn't really what Jesus would want us to do.

Jesus does have an awful lot to say about money, especially in the gospel of Luke. We heard the parable last week about the rich fool. Soon, we'll encounter the rich ruler, who Jesus tells to sell all that he owns and give the money to the poor. We'll hear Jesus say “You cannot serve God and money.” And then we'll meet Zacchaeus, who ends up giving away half of his possessions. Is this what God expects of us? It seems so extreme.

I love how, in the very next verse after the passage we read, Peter asks, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?” Is this challenge really for *me*, or are we just speaking in general terms here? So even right there in its original context, Jesus' words were hard to hear.

¹ Many thanks to Mark Allan Powell who shares this story and many other thoughtful reflections in his excellent book, *Giving to God*.

And yet, what Jesus is saying here is really consistent with the rest of the Biblical witness. The epistles speak of money and material possessions as prime candidates for idolatry. “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,” Paul says. And the Hebrew Scriptures speak over and over again about economic principles like the jubilee (forgiving debts) and the tithe (giving 10% back to God) and sacrifice and caring for the poor and not cheating people out of money and all sorts of reminders about how we must not forget that everything we have is from God, and it all seems a bit much. Can we ever live up to God’s expectations?

And believe me, I’m not immune from these questions. Earlier this week, I was sitting in my house reading this passage. I looked up and around at my beautiful home, the car in the driveway, the abundant possessions, the delicious dinner on the table...then I re-read Luke 12:33: Sell your possessions, and give money to the poor. Suddenly the disconnect between what Jesus said and how I live was too great. God’s expectations seemed too high, and I wondered if I’d ever be able to measure up. It seemed easier to just stretch out that arm, keep my money and possessions dry, and accept my failure through equal doses of discomfort and denial.

But then Jesus reminds us that this connection between our wallets and our hearts cannot be severed. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” How we acquire, and then what we do with our money and material possessions is inexorably tied to our hearts.

Now, this may sound like bad news at first. We can’t keep our wallet dry. We can’t keep this one part of ourselves separate from the rest of our baptismal identity. And maybe we’re afraid that this aspect of our lives is going to cast a shadow on all the other good things we do. I once heard a preacher ask, “What would God say if God did an audit of your finances? How would God judge your financial stewardship?” That was scary. Most of us would probably rather have an IRS audit than have to stand before God and explain why we did what we did with our money and our things, and realize it’s all tied up in who we are. This whole heart and treasure thing really is just more bad news.

But maybe, just maybe, there is some good news here. Maybe we can set aside our anxiety about money and our fear of failure and our being overwhelmed at what seems to be impossible expectations for just a minute, and catch a glimpse of the incredible good news in this passage. Because there is good news for us here, and maybe we’ve just been approaching it from the wrong direction.

As a pastor, I often talk with people who want to know how they can get closer to God. They wonder if there’s a book I’d recommend, a Bible study or a prayer practice. They’re looking for some sort of spiritual discipline that can help them grow in being a disciple, a follower of Jesus. They know that these things can impact their heart, transform them, in powerful ways. They want to live a life that’s in relationship with God.

I do have things like that to recommend, but I have also been known to recommend something that they probably aren’t expecting, and that is to increase their financial giving. Trust me, this is not a fundraising scheme on my part. It’s because Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be.” Our heart follows our treasure, and if we want our heart turned towards God, then Jesus says putting our treasure towards God and the work that God is doing in the world will take our heart there.

How does this work? Well, have you ever noticed that when you buy a new car (or a new-to-you car) that all of a sudden you start noticing them everywhere? We recently bought a minivan for our big expanded family, and the past few weeks I feel like everywhere I go now I see Honda Odysseys. Were these Odysseys not on the road before that? No, I just didn’t notice them. Now that I put a ton of money into one myself, my attention is drawn there.

It’s true with most things we buy. Obviously companies want not just our money, they want our brand loyalty. And they get it, most of the time. When we put our money toward their product, we become committed to their product, and we buy it again, and feel a sense of connection and loyalty to it. Is Heinz ketchup really better than others? I don’t know, but I’m from Pittsburgh so I’m always going to buy Heinz. My heart goes there and every time I buy more, my heart for it gets stronger.

The same is true when we are generous with our resources towards the things that God cares about. When we give our money to the poor, we notice the poor more. When we give money to Second Home, we take more notice of the kids and the families who are just trying to get by, the working poor in our midst. When we give money to initiatives like Harrisonburg's new Earth Day Every Day, we start to notice how much single-use plastic we really do use and dispose of. And when we give money to our congregation's core ministry fund, we start to notice even more the incredible things that God is doing right here in our midst.

So what if we changed the question: Instead of asking "What would God say if God did a financial audit?" what if we asked, "What would happen if God were in charge of our finances?" For me, that sounds like something that's not scary, but actually quite welcome. My observation is that God takes pretty good care of us, and in the places in my life where I've been able to let go of feeling like I need to be in charge of everything and been able to give those things over to God, I've never been disappointed with what God has done. God is at work in building the kingdom in our midst, and what a gift to have our entire lives be a part of that.

Because the good news is that we *can* allow our whole selves to take the plunge. We *can* let go of our tight grip and anxiety clinging to our wallets. We *can* have our hearts be led in God's direction.

Have no fear, little flock, Jesus says. For it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Amen.