

Sermon Title: **“Be Faithful with Dishonest Wealth?”**

Bible: **Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 & Luke 16:1-13**

When: on Sunday, September 18, 2022

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, you gave us the Bible as your love letter. When we read, we hope to find answers for our lives. Even though we cannot find the answers, please find your love, your grace, your generosity, and your presence in our lives. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. One of the Most Difficult Passages

Today’s Gospel Reading of Luke from the lectionary is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible. In this story, there are two main characters: a rich man, and a manager, who was a dishonest manager. This rich man found that his manager was wasting what the rich man had. So, the rich man fired his manager, and told him to bring him all of the finance reports. What the manager did was to waste even more money. It was like this. To the one who owed \$10,000, he told him that it was now \$5,000. To another person who owed \$20,000, the manager told him that it was now \$16,000, less \$4,000. This is very strange. If we were one of these two, the customers of this manager, it might seem like luck was in our favor; we might feel thankful for this manager. But if you were this rich man who had this dishonest manager, what would you like to do? Probably sue him to get the money back? But in this parable, very surprisingly, the rich man praised this dishonest manager. Jesus even told us to

follow this example of the dishonest manager. I believe that many pastors are wrestling with this passage if they follow the lectionary scripture readings. Probably, there will be tons of different understandings and messages given today.

2. Many Translations

My title itself sounds awkward. My title is from Luke 16:11, which is the NRSV, the New Revised Standard Version. The NRSV is one of the two preferred translations for the United Methodist Church. Even though there is no official translation for the United Methodist Church, the NRSV and CEB, the Common English Bible are the two most preferred translations. I prefer to read the NRSV because this translation tries to seek the original text as a word-to-word translation. When we translate something as a sense-to-sense translation, we could lose some original meaning or intentions.

I believe that this Bible is written for all of us, not only for pastors or scholars, but also for all Christians. I also believe that as we love our Lord, we know God. We know God, and we can talk about God. It makes all of us theologians. If you were a biblical scholar, what would be your favored choice of translation? I will show you some different translations.

This is from the NRSV: “If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” You might see a note in your Bible that “Wealth” is from the Greek word, “mammon.” This is from the CEB: “If you haven’t been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?” This is from the NIV, the New International Version: “So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who

will trust you with true riches?” This is from the KJV, the King James Version: “If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?” This is from The Message. Probably, because it follows a sense-to-sense translation, there are no separate verses: “10-13 Jesus went on to make these comments: If you’re honest in small things, you’ll be honest in big things; If you’re a crook in small things, you’ll be a crook in big things. **[No verse 11 translation]** If you’re not honest in small jobs, who will put you in charge of the store? No worker can serve two bosses: He’ll either hate the first and love the second Or adore the first and despise the second. You can’t serve both God and the Bank.” Which one makes the most sense to you? Which one sounds most awkward?

Because I learned some biblical Greek, I looked at the Greek Bible, “ἀδίκῳ μαμωνᾷ.” The word “μαμωνᾷς” is originally from Greek. How do we translate it? Is there a good English word for it? Just “mammon,” as in the KJV? Or wealth or riches? Or “the Bank” as in The Message? The word “ἀδίκος” can be translated into “unjust, unrighteous, vicious, deceitful,” etc. But somehow, the biblical scholars for the NRSV decided to translate it as “dishonest.” Have you heard of “the Dishonest Wealth?” Then, what is “the Dishonest Wealth”?

3. Dishonest Wealth and the Economic Model

This weird word “dishonest wealth” led me to look at our economic system. We are all in this economic system. We are just a small part, individuals in the big system. But we can view our economic system from the outside. What does our economic system look like? Is our economic system fair to all? Can we find grace and justice in our economic system?

I love to drink coffee and tea. Have you heard of fair trade coffee? I have not heard of fair trade gasoline. But I have heard of fair trade coffee. This means that there is something not fair in the coffee supply chain or the coffee company. I am just an individual in the system, and I do not want to be picky. I just want to enjoy a cup of coffee. But at least, I want to think one more time about our economic system, before I drink a cup of coffee.

Have you heard of the divestment campaign? Some churches and denominations, including our United Methodist Church, do some kind of divestment, if there is a conflict between their beliefs and the companies' values. This could be controversial in many ways. Which is a more effective way to use our church's investments, divestment or engagement? We got through the heatwave, the hottest week. Do we want to invest in fossil fuel companies during this time? For the fossil fuel companies, do we need to do divestment or to do engagement through our investment? This was one of the controversial discussions in our General Conference 2016.

4. What Made Us the Number One Country?

I know that our current economic system is supported by many undocumented workers. But when I took a class about the history of racism during the pandemic, I learned a painful but undeniable truth. What enabled the USA, our country, (is it okay for me to say that this is our country?), to become the number one country in the world? I thought that it was because of democracy, and because of capitalism, because of the sacrifice of the free and of the brave. We are the land of the free and the home of the brave. But what I learned is that it was

because of the work of an estimated 600,000 slaves that we became the number one country economically. Slavery is not only a political issue, but also an economic issue. Slavery means no paid labor for the individuals' whole lives, and for the generations. No paid labor for generations made us the number one wealthy country. It is our painful and shameful history. We cannot deny this. I am still trembling at this painful and undeniable history and truth.

5. UMH #375 “There is a Balm in Gilead”

When I read today's scripture reading of Jeremiah, what I felt was only grief, mourning, tears, weeping. Israel was in exile in the Babylonian time. If you were forced to live in another country, like a second or third class citizen or as a slave, how would you feel? There was no hope, only despair. Just like our sisters and brothers who came to North America from Africa. But I am amazed at Afro-American spirituality. There is a United Methodist Hymn #375 “There Is a Balm in Gilead,” which is one of the Afro-American Spiritual songs. We can feel the souls of enslaved Africans in North America: hope in the face of hopelessness, courage in the face of despair. African American theologian Howard Thurman said in his book, *Deep River*, “The slave caught the mood of this spiritual dilemma and with it did an amazing thing, ... a creative triumph.” “There IS a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there IS a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.”

6. Make All You Can, Save All You Can, and Give All You Can!

I would like to close my message with our founder, John Wesley. He gave a message, based

on today's Gospel reading of Luke 16. I think that his teaching about money is still the best application. Make all we can, save all we can, and give all we can. The ultimate goal in making money and saving money is to give, to give all we can.

Our economic system is not perfect. We cannot deny some painful and hidden histories and stories. We might find more dishonest wealth, if we research our economic system objectively from the outside. But in reality, we are part of this big economic system, because we cannot live without money, and outside of this system. We are fragile and vulnerable. But what we can do is to make, to save, and to give. To give can be one of the balms in Gilead for our broken or dishonest economic system. That's because generosity is from God. That's because we are not slaves to money. When we give even a penny, there is God's holy presence and God's generosity. We are the people of freedom, healing, and generosity. We are the people of God on the earth, in this economic system.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, in our economic system, we see brokenness, tears, sometimes dishonesty, oppression, and suffering. What we serve is not the wealth, but you Lord. Please use us as your balms in Gilead for our wounded economic system and our community. In Jesus' name. Amen.