

Making Peace with New Canaan

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Stewardship Sunday, October 14, 2018

Isaiah 55:1-13/ Mark 10:17-31

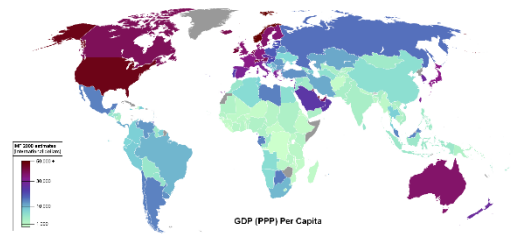
From the bedroom came a cry from a young boy who had been reading his Bible. “Mom! Jesus said the rich can’t go to heaven.”

After a beat, the mother replied, “We aren’t rich. Go to sleep.”

The trouble is, we are rich, and not just because we live in New Canaan.

Compared to most of those who travel with us on this planet around the sun, we are the rich ones. We have enough to eat, clean

water to drink, adequate housing and transportation, the ability to educate our children and to care for them. Those simple things we take for granted would not have been true for most of Jesus’ listeners in Palestine, and they are not true for most people living on earth today.



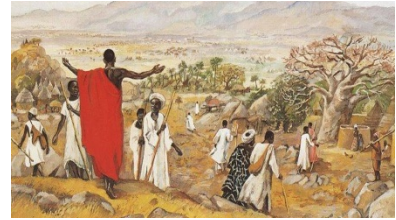
Today is “Stewardship Sunday,” which means I’m supposed to ask you to give more money next year than you did this year. You know the drill. This year, however, I’m **not** going to ask you to give **more**.

I’m going to ask you to **give it all**.

A successful businessman stood up to testify in church and told of a time years before when he was so poor he had only \$10 to his name. He went to church and was so moved that he gave it all in the offering, and the rest is history.

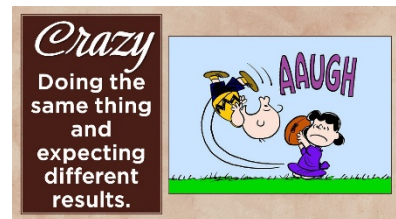
He credited all his wealth to that one act of faith. When he finished his testimony and sat back down, the little old lady behind him leaned forward, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "I dare you to do it again!"

You heard what Jesus said in the Gospel lesson, so don't blame me. It is the assigned scripture for today, so people attending churches that follow the lectionary heard it just like you ... and, like you, they all thought, "I knew I should have slept in this morning."

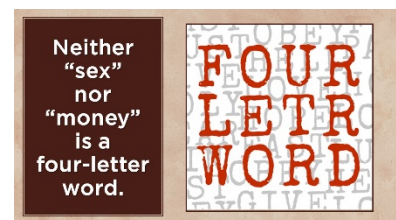


Most of us have been Christians long enough to know the word "stewardship" should remind us that we are trustees or caretakers, not owners. Unfortunately, the church has done a poor job in this area.

This semester, the dean at Hartford Seminary asked me to teach a class on "21st Century Stewardship." I was dubious, but, much to my surprise, it is the largest class I have ever taught. Apparently, many church leaders recognize that what we're doing isn't working.



The church has made the same mistake with money that it once made around human sexuality. When I was growing up, the church never talked about sex, except in terms of what they were against. I got the definite impression that sex was evil, dirty, and profane, and, therefore, it should be saved for marriage. The church has done a similar thing with money. We never talk about it, except when we want some of it from you.



Almost every Protestant church in America has a stewardship campaign in the fall. They preach sermons, send out letters, and offer testimonies, all to get people to give more money so they can fund the next year's budget. That simply isn't working anymore because stewardship is NOT about giving to church. It is about who you are and how you live your whole life.



Yes, the church needs money to do its ministry, and, yes, you have that money, but we are spiritually and morally derelict if the church talks about money only when we need some.

I am trying to teach churches to move from a fall pledge campaign to a year-round stewardship campaign. The church needs to stop talking about money only when we need some. We must do the work of *whole life spiritual* formation, and our money is the most accurate expression of who we really are.



The church often rails against consumerism, greed, and materialism. We talk about our failure to protect the environment, and we wring our hands about income inequality, poverty, and hunger. This may make us feel better, but the truth is, these are **moral issues** rooted in our unhealthy and unholy relationship with money.

We might blame greed on Wall Street, or materialism on Madison Avenue, or income inequality and poverty on Washington, but the truth is it is **our fault**. It is the fault of the church who has failed to **teach** healthy and holy values around money.

Just as too many young people learn about sex from the streets because we fail to teach them that it is as a sacred gift from God, so, too, our whole culture has learned their financial values in the market place because the church has abdicated our responsibility to teach about the stewardship of life.

Where else are people going to learn that, “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein”? Who else will tell them that **all of life** belongs to God, and we have been sent here to care for it, use it gently, enjoy it along the way, and leave it behind when we go. Stewardship is a **permeating awareness** that we are caretakers of life NOT owners.

There was a Southern evangelist named Tommy Franks who was driving along one night and picked up a hitchhiker. After a couple of hours, Tommy was about to exit, so he pulled over to let the hitchhiker out. At this point, the man pulled a gun and demanded Tommy’s money. Tommy looked at him and said, “Son, none of the money I have belongs to me. If the owner wants you to have it, you don’t need a gun, and, if not, a gun isn’t gonna get it. The money belongs to God. Let us pray.”

Someone later asked Tommy what kind of prayer he uttered, and he said, “I prayed a prayer of repentance, because if that hitchhiker had been with me all that time and thought he needed a gun to get me to help him, then I clearly hadn’t demonstrated the love of God to him.”

Now, the first lesson in this is: Don’t pick up hitchhikers! The story also reminds us that all we have belongs to God. What we do with it either reflects well or poorly on the Owner. That is what stewardship means.



Frankly, I don't care how much of your money you give to the church. If Christians all would remember that we are merely the caretakers of **God's money**, churches would be fine and God's reign would come on earth as it is in heaven.

There once lived a rich woman named Carla who loved to saddle one of her thoroughbreds and ride around her vast estate. One day, as she rode along a stone fence, there, seated silently on the fence under the shade of an apple tree, was her neighbor, a poor woman named Greta. "What are you doing there, old woman?" Carla asked.

Greta looked up a bit startled. "I was just giving God thanks for my lunch. Would you like to share my apple sandwich?" she asked.

"Why on earth would you give thanks for that pitiful lunch? My horse eats better than that," Carla said with scorn.

"I have much to be thankful for, m'lady. God has never yet let me go hungry, I have a family who loves me, and 'tis a lovely day. I still have my sight to see the flowers bloom, and I can still hear the robins sing."

"Hmmpf," said Carla, turning her horse toward home.

Greta called out, "I am truly glad to see you today."

"Why is that?" asked Carla.

Greta replied timidly, "I had a dream just before waking this morning in which the Lord told me that the richest person in that valley would die today. I'm glad to see you alive and well."

"Dreams are just a lot of nonsense," Carla said as she rode away. As she did, Carla thought she heard Greta praying for her, and the dream worried her a bit because she knew the old woman to be very devout.

By the time she returned to the great house, Carla was feeling a bit winded and her chest had begun to hurt. She decided to rest a while and figured the pain would go away.

She couldn't sleep, though. Old Greta's words haunted her. Finally, when she decided to get up, she discovered she was unable to rise. In a panic, she called her servants and sent them to fetch the doctor.

After an examination, the doctor could find nothing wrong. Carla told him about Greta's dream that the richest person in the valley would die before midnight. "Carla," said the physician, "You, indeed, are the richest person in the valley, but you are not going to die. You are as strong as your thoroughbreds."

Carla was greatly relieved, but still she couldn't sleep. She was sitting by the fire when, just before midnight, a servant brought word that old Greta had died.

Death is the inevitable and irresistible reminder that we are only stewards, even of our breath. When, at the reading of our last will and testament, someone asks, "How much did they leave?" the answer, no matter how rich we are, is EVERYTHING.



Jesus said that it was impossible for the rich to get into heaven. That might make those of us who live in places like New Canaan nervous, but I think he was saying that the rich and the poor alike came into this life with nothing and leave the same way. No amount of money will get us into heaven. Only God can make that possible, even for you and me. Amen.