

Loss and Gain, by Tim Hall

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 25 September 2022

[RCL:] Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

We know that autumn is upon us when the days become shorter than the nights, the breeze has a chillier, rather than cooling, tinge to it, and our lectionary readings turn to talk of money. Yes, fall equals stewardship time in the church. And just like what we are hearing now on public radio and television, your parish and the larger church are asking you to consider your pledge for next year so that 2023 budgets can be thoughtfully and prayerfully prepared.

Last week, when the cover art on our bulletin was the money tree... remember it? **[show cover]** ... we heard Rev Deb preach on that challenging parable known as “The Dishonest Manager”. This was the story of the farm manager who was being fired by his rich employer for squandering his property. Before he goes, the manager makes deals with many of his master’s debtors that allow them to pay off their debts at favorable rates... thus increasing his own esteem in their eyes. And for this he is praised by his master! Because of this unexpected twist, the parable is thus, often called, “The Shrewd Manager”.

There follow some hard to fathom verses. First, “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” And then some advice about being faithful in a little being the same as faithful in much. And the same is said about dishonesty. Finally, the summarized takeaway from the lesson, which is a bit more straight forward, is, “You cannot serve God and wealth.”

That was the same message in our Gospel reading from the first Sunday in September, the start of stewardship season, by the way, when Jesus turned to the crowds that were following him and told them a couple of short parables about being prepared. The first was about someone building a tower and doing the planning and estimating the cost before proceeding. The second was about a king preparing to wage war.

These stories were bookended by the heart of the lesson, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”, and “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” These bookends were beautifully illustrated in our bulletin cover art that week. **[show cover]** As hard as these lessons are, Jesus shares them with us time and time again.

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.” *[Matthew 6:19-20]*

There’s the parable of the Rich Fool that we read earlier this summer. The one where the wealthy man’s land provides an abundant harvest and he builds bigger barns to store the excess yield. But his life is required of him that very night. *[Luke 12:13-21]*

You can probably recount as many as I can. Perhaps not chapter and verse. But we recall, and know in our hearts, the essence of what Jesus tells us in so many different ways, through his word and example.

Today’s Gospel reading brings all these stories to their final, inescapable conclusion. Upon his death the rich man, after living a life of luxury and ignoring the needs of the poor, is cast into Hell from which, for eternity, there is no escape. While poor Lazarus, who suffered greatly during life, is carried by the angels to Heaven.

Jesus, earlier, had taught in his beatitudes, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” *[Luke 6:20, 24]*

And he emphasizes this again through the words of Abraham in heaven, “during your lifetime you received your good things, and now you are in agony. Lazarus in like manner received evil things; but now he is comforted.”

The rich man has paid the ultimate price for his selfishness, the loss of his very soul.

Two weeks ago, Rev Martha preached on loss and being lost. We heard two parables that week, “The lost sheep” and “The lost coin”. We had another beautiful Good Shepherd icon for our cover art that week. Perhaps you didn’t see

it in color. Here it is. *[show cover]* Martha told us about the days before GPS when we relied on paper maps and directions from our friends or family (or Triple-A) to help get us where we wanted to go. And about sometimes being completely turned around and going off in the wrong direction. I'm sure we've all been there, whether on the road or on other highways of life.

Many years ago Judy and I had taken our two young girls on a wintertime trip to Blackwater Falls, West Virginia, for a bit of cross country skiing and camaraderie with friends and their children. We were all sharing a cabin near the lodge and found ourselves preparing for a large group dinner one late afternoon. Well, the cabins there are not spacious and with many folks preparing the food and the kids bouncing off the walls things were getting a bit cramped. So my friend Jay and I thought we'd take the kids on a quick hike to get them out of the way. Off we went on some nice trails through the fairly open forest on our way to the lodge to see what was going on there.

After a time, we realized we didn't really know the way to the lodge through this "short cut" so decided it was best to return to the cabin, since the sun was getting lower in the sky and dusk was approaching. After passing the same spot a couple of times, we realized we were quite lost... two grown men with 6 or 7 small children in tow. 4 to 8 year olds. We were scared, but we couldn't let the kids know. How will we keep everyone warm if we're out all night. Any flashlights? No. It was daytime when we left. Matches? Uh-uh. Blankets or sleeping bags? Not a chance. Cell phones? They didn't exist yet! Luckily, we made a plan to always bear to the left whenever we came to a path decision point, and managed to shepherd our whole flock of little ones safely back to the cabin.

But the parable of the lost coin really hit home this past week. I lost my wallet on the first morning of the Bluemont Fair last weekend. Had no idea where it was. It just wasn't in my back pocket where it was supposed to be when I went off to purchase some goodies at the bake sale. Well, like the woman in the parable, I scoured every known location that I could think where I'd been. The classroom at the community center where I was helping with fair treasurer duties. Under the seats and in the glovebox and everywhere inside and around my car. It was not to be found. I figured I must have just forgotten to bring it with me and it was likely sitting on my dresser at home. But without my wallet I was kind of a lost soul. I had no money, no credit cards, no ID.

When I arrived home that evening it was not on my dresser, as I had hoped, so I replayed the scouring process of the morning in my house, with no success. Did I leave it at CVS, the last place I remembered shopping before it disappeared? They couldn't find it when I called. Were there any untoward charges being made on any of my cards? No. So it was just plain lost! And I was like a man without a country. Especially when I tried to cash a check at my bank on Monday morning.

Long story short, I needed Judy to come home from Florida to find it. I picked her up at Dulles on Monday evening and by mid-morning Tuesday, as I was out on my courier run, she called to say she had found it on top of a railing post in our 2nd floor hallway. I was amazed, since I had probably walked by it a dozen times. Obviously I had been looking in all the wrong places. But I was also rejoicing, just like the woman in the parable, and sharing the good news with friends!

Loss can be experienced in so many ways. Losing our way or losing something are two examples. We can recover from those. Losing a game? Well don't lose your temper! Losing a loved one can last a lifetime. Losing our zeal for life, our direction, our purpose, can lead to depression and worse.

How can we find true fulfillment in our lives? Is it through building up ourselves at the expense of others? Is it through socking away everything we can to prepare for that future rainy day? No!

It is by putting our trust in Jesus. By dwelling in the shelter of the Most High. Truly dwelling there. By saying and praying to the Lord, "You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust."

We must "listen to Moses and the prophets", who taught care for the widow and the orphan and the poor, and live our lives with conviction that Jesus rose from the dead to save our souls. To give our life meaning. To keep us from being lost sheep.

In *[Matthew 16:24-26]* Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet lose their soul?" *[TobyMac song]* There's a song by TobyMac that I've recently discovered, even though it came out nearly 15 years ago. It's a pop rap song

called “Lose My Soul” and I commend it to you. I didn’t think I liked rap, but I love this song. The refrain is “I don’t want to gain the whole world and lose my soul.”

So how is this all related to stewardship? Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it. One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is there for us. It is God who provides. Always and forever. God has given us all we need, and it is **our great joy to give back**. It is through honoring God and living a godly, righteous life, that we are found.

The excerpt from Paul’s letter to Timothy this morning reads like a stewardship campaign. But rather than reciting it to you this morning, I urge you to reread it as you consider your upcoming pledge to Good Shepherd for 2023, your pledge to supporting God’s work in the world, here in our little community of faith. We can be the hands and feet of Jesus. We can share the light of Christ. Together, through our faith and the grace of God, we can make a difference.

The Epistle: 1 Timothy 6:6-19

There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time-- he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.