

Sermon, St. David's, Proper 20C, 9/18/2022, Luke 16:1-13 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

This morning's parable is ambiguous, much like the relationship most of us have with money. We all need money. Most of us think we don't have enough of it. We don't think others save or spend their money correctly.

I hate it when Jesus brings up money in our Sunday readings, but Jesus talked about money and possessions more than anything else in the Bible. This is something Christians must talk about again and again and again.

The parable may be ambiguous, with Jesus seeming to praise the way the crafty manager handles dishonest wealth while also saying whoever is dishonest in little is dishonest in much. What's not ambiguous is the last line: You cannot serve God and wealth."

We cannot serve God and wealth.

What does that mean for you personally? Do you try to use money as a tool for good? When does it go wrong? What possessions do you truly value, and why? Do you own anything mostly for status?

These are hard questions, aren't they?

I used to feel really good about myself because I drove an old Honda Civic. But if I felt good about it because it wasn't a fancy car, then I kinda lost any edge I might have had because it wasn't a more expensive car. I have a newer car now, and I loved driving that new car around. I even named the car. Then I hit my garage with the car four months after we bought it, startling my husband since it, you know, it basically shook the whole house so he came flying down the stairs asking WHAT HAPPENED. I left the dent and garage paint on the car, thinking that would keep me from being too in love with my new car. But it didn't. She still has a name. Ellie. Short for Elegant Gray Catbird. I love how she looks and her elegant, premium paint color. And did you hear how I just gendered her? I personified my possession.

I LOVE MY CAR. How can I stand up here and preach to all of you when I love this possession of mine? Jesus must be appalled.

But I know that every single one of you also has possessions that you love.

Yet we cannot serve God and wealth.

What does that mean for the church?

I see some similarities in my feelings about my car as I feel about St. David's. I'm proud that we are not a fancy marble-altar high-ceiling parish with a silver chalice dating back to colonial times. I love that we didn't spend thousands of dollars for our chasubles and dalmatics and altar hangings. Instead of using a catalogue, they were made by Vee. I'm still proud of them. They are far superior to ones procured from a catalogue. We could not afford to pay Vee what they are worth.

We also could not have afforded what our labyrinth is worth. A few people labored very, very hard, and while we used funds from the New Ministries and Innovation fund, much of the material and equipment rentals were donated.

So is our labyrinth a possession? And then is our building—this building, in which we baptize babies and join couples in marriage and bury our beloved dead—is this building a possession?

How do we spend our money as a church? We spend so much of it on the building, but we spend even more on me. I am our biggest single expense. Episcopal clergy are expensive.

I was away at a conference for three days last week for bivocational clergy. I became bivocational here at St. David's in January 2021. That means that I have two callings and two jobs. One of them is here, but my hours here max out each week at 30. We have taken steps to make sure that people still feel loved even though they get much less of me, so we increased Connie's hours, so she is now on the pastoral care team, helping to make sure that we follow up with parishioners who have health issues and or other concerns that they have shared with us. We also have a pastoral care commission chair, Travis Kennedy, as well as a vestry pastoral care liaison, currently filled by our register, Mike Santoro.

Because I am part-time at St. David's does not mean I only work part-time. My other calling is writing: books and essays and commentaries and Bible studies outside of what we do here in church.

This change—that is, my hours to thirty hours a week—came about after pledges dropped sharply in 2020 and after I came back from my cancer treatment at the same time and had trouble diving in with the same energy I'd had before.

What you might not know is that I longed to become bivocational before those events gave me an opportunity. I'd floated the idea by someone at the diocese before our current bishop was consecrated and was shot down. But the pandemic and shutdown changed things.

What you might not know is that while juggling two calls is hard, my depleted energy from 2020 has come back, and part of that is because my writing creates more energy for St. David's. Both of these passions feed each other.

The most important thing you might now know isn't about *me* at all, but about our beloved church, here on the corner in North Chesterfield as well as all over the country. I believe that more churches and clergy can embrace this model of bivocational ministry. It's not for everyone, but St. David's has had a history of strong, empowered lay leadership, and that's not a culture I created: I found you all that way.

We have to pay attention to how we spend our money and ministry as a church. We are called to be stewards of this place that we love. If you don't love it yet, I hope you will grow to, the way that those who lovingly dug and tamped down gravel and cut bricks to painstakingly create a labyrinth love it. The way Vee loves it as she cuts strips of fabric to make altar hangings. The way Ginny loves it when she cuts grass, or that Cathy loves it as she plants flowers. The way the

flower guild loves arranging flowers, and the coffee hour volunteers as they bake cookies. And Connie as she makes phone calls checking on people.

We have acts of love beyond money, and giving money to the church is an act of love. Giving money also means paying attention to how we use that money as a church. I'm not asking you to scour our budget and tell us that we can save \$100 a year by switching phone companies or newsletter systems. (And seriously, if you say something like that to me, I will immediately find something pressing to do in another room.) But we as a church are called to explore how we are using our wealth as a church. Just because we have debt does not mean we don't have wealth. We do, as people and as a church. How will we use that wealth to serve God? What can we learn about how to use this wealth through Jesus' parable this morning?