



The Shrewd Manager
Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (September 18, 2022)

Mackenzie Scott, novelist and former wife to Jeff Bezos, is increasing her reputation for generosity with a significant donation to the California Community Foundation. This week she donated two mansions in Beverly Hills estimated at worth around \$55 million. The foundation announced that 90% of the proceeds will go toward providing grants for affordable housing. The remaining 10% is slated to be used for programs for integration of immigrants. Hundreds of charities have benefited from her generosity.

Critics say Amazon and many large companies create wealth by underpaying their workforces around the world. Ms. Scott's positive use of that wealth certainly goes a long way to making more friends than enemies. Jesus tells us in the story that leniency, generosity, and forgiveness are attributes of the divine, and when we exercise these things ourselves, we are closer to heaven. In the 'business' of Christian discipleship, the generous, open handed, forgiving approach is the one which most closely reflects the nature of God.

The conflict in the story, is not just the true and false wealth, it is also the human conflict of making generous and lenient choices. We are called to give, not take, forgive not nurture grudges and to be kind rather than demanding. This is the point of Jesus' story to me. It is a 'lifestyle' choice.

Money is one of Jesus' favorite topics in the gospels. He discussed it more than he did faith, prayer, and heaven & hell combined. It's mentioned way more often than sex and rightly so! What we do with money says a lot about our values; with it we can do both great and horrible things.

What is it about money that makes it so dangerous? Money promises to give us everything that our hearts' desire. Money promises security, power, comfort and approval. We love money because we love what it promises it will give us. And whatever we love becomes our god.

Jesus doesn't treat money as a harmless benign thing because it has a mastering and consuming effect on us. Fear of what we are lacking, of what we don't have, and the craving for more creates an insatiable desire for it in our hearts. It's a master that generates exclusive worship and servanthood.

When God commands us to give it's not because God wants our money. God wants our heart. When God commands us to be generous it's not because God wants to take things from us. God wants to give us Godself.

God doesn't want the money out of our pockets. God wants the idols out of our heart.

Giving money should be the hardest and the easiest thing in the world. The hardest because we have to get rid of the idols in our heart. The easiest thing because we're giving to the One who has given us everything.

Giving money should be the hardest and the easiest thing in the world...if it's yours to give.

Jesus' gospel story about a rich plantation owner and his Chief Financial Officer. In this parable, the boss, who apparently made his fortune by overcharging produce, learns that his manager was less than devoted to increasing his master's fortune. Jesus doesn't say whether the manager was inept or dishonest, but the owner got wind of postponed payments, decided to call for an audit and send the guy packing. Possibly out of greed and a desire for more, the system was set up to squeeze more money out of buyers, precipitating them into debt.

That's when the CFO, now debt-collector-for-hire, initiated a new, creative management strategy.

Both boss and steward knew that the tenant farmers' debts would probably never be paid in full. In a fragile hand-to-mouth economy, anything may contribute to create an existential crisis. A drought, floods, a plague of insects and other all-too-normal catastrophes regularly ruined sharecroppers' chances of getting out of debt. Here's where the manager proves that he's smarter than the boss gave him credit for.

He calls in the people defaulting on their loans and offers them a discount in return for immediate payment. The genius of the situation is that the new payment is within the means of the debtors, it brings otherwise unobtainable income to the owner, and it puts the manager in good graces with both sides. It starts as an ethically questionable maneuver but ends up being a fair, equitable, and affordable three-way win!

Was Jesus accepting the trickery in light of the results? It rather seems so. First, explaining the manager's activity, Jesus advises, "Make friends for yourselves with unrighteous mammon." (Mammon is surplus money — more than one needs to live decently, associated with the greedy pursuit of gain.)

A few lines later, Jesus warns, "You cannot serve both God and mammon." He seems to be saying that mammon has questionable value in itself but can and should be used to do some good.

Managing our possessions is a spirituality issue. It is also an ethical and social issue. Let us grow in our relationship with possessions in responsible ways remembering that all comes from God and all is given for our personal, spiritual growth and the growth of the kingdom. Amen.