

“Who Will You Serve?”

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Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ²So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ ³Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ ⁸And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

¹⁰ ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’

In the days following Hurricane Katrina a lot of people in New Orleans and surrounding areas found themselves in trying and difficult situations. One such person was Dr. Anna Pou. When Hurricane Katrina hit Dr. Pou remained behind to care for patients in the Lifecare Facility of Memorial Medical Center in New Orleans. In the three days following Hurricane Katrina the medical center became an island unto itself as the flood waters that surrounded it rose to 15 feet. Eventually the facility lost electricity and temperatures inside rose to a sweltering 115 degrees. Food and water supplies were running low, ample staff was not available to attend to the needs of patients, and needed medical supplies were beginning to run low. Dr. Pou and others found themselves faced

with a difficult decision – what would they do for these patients who were suffering and for whom they couldn't provide adequate care.

In the midst of this difficult situation it seems as if Dr. Pou administered ultimately lethal combinations of pain killers to these patients for whom adequate treatment was not available, surely not an easy decision to make. Nearly a year after the storm hit she was arrested for her supposed role in these deaths. A Grand Jury finally ruled on July 24th of this year and issued a “No True Bill” meaning that charges would be no further pursued in the case. This was welcome news for Dr. Pou who will soon return to her medical practice.

I can only imagine what must've been going on in the mind of Dr. Pou if and when she made the decision to administer these drugs to these patients. I am sure that she was aware of all of the potential legal ramifications that existed. I am confident that she knew she was taking a risk that could have professional ramifications. At the same time I also trust that Dr. Pou was listening to the call of a higher power, of her conscience, of the Divine as she struggled to decide what to do. And when push came to shove, rather than living in fear of rules and restrictions and potential ramifications, she made the decision to follow her gut, her calling as a medical professional, to relieve these patients from their suffering.

The decision that Dr. Pou was faced with is one that has ancient echoes in our story as people of faith. In Deuteronomy 30 we hear the voice of God say, “I set before you life and death... chose life.” While Dr. Pou might have made decisions that lead to the death of some patients she made a choice for herself – was she going to be paralyzed by the fear of litigation and ramification, was she going to let patients continue to suffer

in the heat without food and water, was she going to ignore her conscience and calling as a doctor for fear of what might happen? And Dr. Pou it seems, decided that her answer was no. She chose to live her life as she believed she was called to live, to do all that she could within the circumstances she found herself to treat and care for the patients in her midst.

Today's parable is yet another echo of the theme that we as human beings have choices to make, choices between life and death, choices between the call that God places on our lives and the call of the other voices that constantly scream for our attention.

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In this text we encounter Jesus telling his disciples a parable. In the parable there is a manager who cheats his landowner. The landowner finds out about it and fires the manager. In response to being fired the manager further cheats the landowner by going

around to his customers and reducing the debts that they owe. He does this we are told in the hopes of getting on the good side of these clients so that he can be protected and taken care of upon losing his job and income and security. The dishonest manager cheats his master so that he can be comfortable and protected in life. How much are we like this?

And then comes the kicker – in verse 13 Jesus says, “*No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*” We can’t serve both God and wealth. This clear statement is a sermon in and of itself about the importance of stewardship, the importance of giving a designated portion of our income to the work of God through the church. And I hope that you hear this clearly as a reminder to be faithful in your pledge to Ridge to make sure that we can continue answering God’s call as a congregation. But this morning I want to look at this parable from a different perspective, I want us to take it a level deeper than simply as a call to financial stewardship.

For most of my life I have used food in a number of negative ways. I have relied on food for comfort when I’m stressed or worried. I have turned to food for something to do when I’m bored. I have looked into the refrigerator and cabinets when I’m tired at night. I have eaten too much too often for the wrong reasons because, well, it was just kind of who I was and what I did.

I have always acknowledged that God created me, that I am created in God’s image, and that God would desire a whole and happy life for me. But, the reality is, when I stress ate, or ate from boredom, or used food as a means of escaping stress or connecting with others I would cheat God’s hopes for a happy and healthy me so that I

could be satisfied and feel good in the short term. I would use food as a crutch to be instantly satisfied rather than struggling with what it would mean to truly be satisfied with life in the long term.

While I, of course, have to take responsibility for my own actions and behaviors I must also admit that I can see how it was easy for me to fall into those traps living in our culture. We are constantly surrounded by images of food. We are enticed by television, newspaper, and online advertisements for an incredible variety of food that is available at our finger tips. Our culture is inundated with eating contests, all you can eat buffets, buy one get one free deals, and more variety in our snack and meal options than we can really even fathom. We are constantly being sent signals to consume, to eat this and to try that. We are programmed to intertwine our happiness with the food that we eat. And we are faced with a choice – to choose life or to choose death...

This last Advent I spent a good amount of time reflecting on my life as we prepared for the coming of Christ at Christmas. On the fourth Sunday of Advent I preached a sermon that might have been forgettable for many of you, but one that really stuck with me. In the sermon I called “Living Wonderfully” I talked about God’s promise to offer us all life and life abundantly. And I spent some time investigating those distractions that we all face, those things that keep us from truly engaging in and living that abundant life that God offers to us.

I talked some about the way in which we get distracted by entertainment and amusement – we watch television and movies, we play video and computer games, we read fiction constantly, we let ourselves get so wrapped up in the stories of others that we forget to live the lives to which God has called us. I also talked about the ways in which

we get distracted from the offer for abundant life by the ways in which we consume – we consume way too much food that is bad for us and suffer a variety of health consequences for it. We also become wrapped up in consuming things, placing our value and worth in that of the things we own. And finally, I talked some about the way in which we get so wrapped up in and distracted by work. People so often get stuck in a cycle of having to work way too much to afford their entertainment and the things they consume and then they rely on entertainment and consumables to escape work. It is a vicious cycle and as a culture we work way too much for our own good and for the good of others.

As I reflected on this sermon last December I decided to go ahead and set some Christmas Resolutions – to make some promises to God and to myself that were related to living the abundant life I believe God would truly want me to live. And so I resolved last December to take better care of myself, to lose some weight, to make sure that I exercised regularly, and to make sure that I didn't get too wrapped up in work or the entertainment of the world. In addition to eating right and caring for my body I sought to care for my spirit and soul by being more connected to my community, to my friends and family.

Over the course of the last seven months I have sought to do all of these things and over the last couple of months many of you have offered me conversation about one area in particular – my weight loss. Yes, over the course of the last seven months I have lost nearly 60 pounds, but that's not what I believe is the most significant part of the transformation I have been through. I feel like I am a new person in ways that run much deeper than my physical appearance and health. I have felt more alive and more connected to God and to the rest of the world around me than I ever have before. I am

healthier, happier, and more who I think God would want me to be than I have ever been. I eat things that I know my body needs when I need to eat them, I exercise regularly, I watch less TV, and I am more engaged in the lives of my family and friends. I feel like, for the first time in my life, when it comes to day to day living I am serving God more than the demands and the call of the world.

I say all of this, not to praise myself, but to make the case that it can be done. If you had told me a year ago that I would weigh what I do today, I would have laughed at you. If you had told me a year ago that I could have walked away from the TV and not cared much, I wouldn't have been convinced. If you would have told me a year ago that I would be running a couple of miles a day I would have thought you were nuts!

I am not unique, I am just one person, and I truly believe that all of us have what it takes to respond to God's call to turn back to God, to serve God and not wealth, not the pursuit of consumables that drives our culture. After these last seven months I am convinced that any of us can choose life, can choose to truly serve God and to turn away from those pursuits and those things that distract us all.

Last Sunday I went by the hospital to visit a member of Ridge who had been admitted with a minor case of pneumonia. After being admitted some tests were run and some emphysema was found. As I sat and talked with this individual he told me that he was done smoking. "No more," he said. For him it wasn't worth it to continue smoking knowing the ways in which it was negatively affecting his body. Hearing from the doctors that word, "Emphysema" he thought of members of his family who had died from Emphysema and knew that he didn't want to go through it. He had a choice to make – to choose life or to choose death – and he choose life.

In the book of Deuteronomy we hear the initial option laid out before us – to choose life or to choose death. In the parable that Jesus tells today we are reminded that we can't serve both God and wealth. We are reminded today of God's promise in the gospel of John to offer us abundant life. And we all face choices every day. Thankfully most of us will never have to make decisions like Dr. Pou did in New Orleans, but let us always be faithful to the call that God puts on our lives, to not be too concerned about rules, and structure, and expectation, and distraction. Let us rather face each day with the willingness to choose life, to be good stewards of all of the gifts that God has given us, and to remember that we can't serve both God and wealth.