

Year C 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31
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I would like to tell you the story of two ministries. Both loved God and wanted to honor the Lord in their lives. Please treat these as allegorical in nature as that is the intent. The first was a community of faith that didn't have much money- most of them were of modest means and the church budget was always strained to cover even the most basic operating expenses. They had been through some very hard things in their life together that had left them deeply wounded with some deep feelings of resentment toward past leadership, the diocese, and even toward one another. Their buildings were badly in need of serious repair and the inside spaces were shabby, worn, and sorely out of date. A spirit of poverty had taken hold among them making them believe even the most urgent repairs were out of reach and they continued to operate in a deficit in spite of how little they were spending.

But then a spiritual shift took place reflecting a gradual change of focus and attitude. Rather than feeding their anger over past hurts, they sought forgiveness and healing and worked to forgive those who they felt had failed them, moving into a place of love and peace and a focus on the Lord and his grace and mercy. They sought to grow in their faith and in a knowledge and appreciation for God's Word. Rather than worrying about what they didn't have they took stock of what they had and began to move forward in faith with the most necessary repairs finding the Lord provided

in unexpected ways stretching their resources to accomplish more than they would have ever imagined even with a much larger budget. With each unexpected blessing, they learned to trust more in the Lord and in God's abundance rather than in their worldly resources. They were astounded by the results. They were able to restore their crumbling historic building, not only making the structure sound but making it beautiful once again inside and out. They restored the stained glass windows and recovered them so they could be enjoyed from the outside as well as by those within. Attendance improved and new people joined drawn by the love and faithfulness they found there. Opportunities to grow in their faith abounded, worship was joyful and strengthened as more joined in. They also found their ability to care for those in need both locally and in their annual mission trip grew beyond what they had ever imagined. But it was all through keeping their trust in the Lord and their focus on His love and infinite goodness. They experienced healing, growth, new life, and restoration because they were focused on loving and trusting the Lord rather than having the money dictate who they were and what they could accomplish. The abundance of God was demonstrated one surprise after another.

This is not the prosperity gospel. The individuals in the community didn't become any wealthier from a financial viewpoint. But they had developed a sense of

wellbeing and a joy in the Lord. They were grateful to the Lord for His goodness and had hope for the road ahead. They were thriving and the spirit of poverty was gone replaced by a spirit of grace and trust in the Lord. A shift in attitude and focus had changed the entire narrative.

The second community of faith was every bit as dedicated to serving the Lord. They were themselves people of greater means and they had a much more generous budget to work with. They too had some history that had been hurtful and they continued to operate in an environment of distrust and resentment. Their focus was very much occupied by their concern over their budget. Even when their budget grew it never seemed to be enough. They too were operating in a spirit of poverty- what they had was never enough for what they believed they needed resulting in discord and resentment. As the verses immediately before our reading in Timothy say quoting from the Passion Bible and changing only the verb tense, "They were loaded with controversy, and loved to argue their opinions and split hairs. The fruit of their ministry was contention, competition, and evil suspicions." While the work they were doing was for the good of others and their intentions were to do good work, they were themselves being spiritually crippled by their preoccupation with money. Rather than attracting others to join them, people found other ways to care for those in need wanting no part of the contentious nature of the community.

The key difference between the two was the focus of their trust. As our reading from Timothy says, "There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment." When our focus is on heavenly things rather than on earthly riches, we live in the one who fills us with the infinite love and

abundance of life that no amount of worldly riches can contain. As Psalm 91 says, "He who abides in the shelter of the Most High, abides under the shadow of the Almighty. He shall say to the Lord, "You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust." Contentment is a frame of mind which is completely independent of outward things. Contentment carries the secret of happiness within itself. It comes from an inner attitude of life. It's not about how much we possess but about the focus of our desires. When our desire is to abide in the presence of the Almighty- to live in that personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ- we will not be disappointed because God has made himself known to us and continues to do so through the witness of His Son Jesus Christ, through His Word in Holy Scripture, and through His ministering Holy Spirit who fills us with God's presence when we come to the Lord in prayer, in worship, and in song. It is within that covenant relationship with God that we are blessed to be a blessing. It's not about the budget or our financial net worth either individually or corporately for there is no limit to what God can do when we trust in Him.

This Sunday we launch our Stewardship campaign. But the goal for our campaign must not be more money even when our goal is for good cause. Thankfully I know that Jed, our Stewardship chair, is a man of deep faith and knows this himself and lives it in his life. The goal is for a greater faithfulness among our parishioners in their desire to honor and serve the Lord in their lives; to live for the glory of God and in the joy of His presence, mercy, and grace. The hope is for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on God's people, anointing us to live in a way that honors the Lord, to accomplish God's purposes, and for a manifestation of

the presence of the Holy Spirit at work within and among us. May this place be characterized by the love of Christ and the movement of the Holy Spirit. The goal is for the community of Macon to be a better, more gracious, more loving place because of our presence here. If the amount of money raised in this campaign in pledges or gifts is increased we will trust God to lead us in using it wisely and with the same spirit of generosity in which it was given to be an instrument of the blessings of God. It is our hope that the Lord works through us in accordance with His will so that those who gather here for worship, study and fellowship are richly blessed as they grow in the Lord, and are faithful witnesses as they go forth from this place to love and serve the Lord in the name of Christ. The amount of money we raise in pledges or financial gifts or the amount of money we are able to give to other ministries in this community or overseas in the service of those in need is a byproduct and reminder of God's abundant grace as we live in relationship with the Lord, never the goal. Even when our intentions are to use the money for good, the love of money- or the craving for more of it- in the words of Timothy- pushes us away from the faith into error, compounding misery in our lives.

So as we begin this campaign, let our focus be on a greater faithfulness and love of the Lord, let our longing be for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon and among us, and the love of Jesus within our hearts and our minds. Even as we celebrate a successful campaign- for I know it will be successful, regardless of the numbers, when our trust is in the Lord- let us celebrate the one who is the source of all good gifts for He is indeed faithful. Let us celebrate the abundance of God's provision glorifying the giver not the gifts. Our joy and our focus is

to glorify God as we serve the Lord in the many ways we have been called to serve. When the resources we are given grow we rejoice that we are given the opportunity to expand our ministry both in the church and beyond as we serve in faithfulness and honor that responsibility. But whatever the scale of our service and ministry, we are called to be content with what we have been given knowing that as we use what we have been given in a spirit of gratitude and with faithfulness, the Lord will demonstrate his abundance and steadfast love as we move forward in faith.

Amen