

## **MONEY AND POWER**

### **Pentecost 19 – Cycle C: Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31**

Perhaps it is because of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler who would not give up his earthly possessions to become one of Jesus' followers that we think we understand the message Jesus is trying to communicate in today's parable. And in fact, the pairing of the Gospel with the passage from 1 Timothy that reminds us that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" strongly suggests that money, however popular as an illustration in Jesus' teaching, has a negative value in faith circles. But the account in our First Reading of Jeremiah buying a field at Anathoth, just as everybody in Judah recognizes that their history as a nation is about to come to an end, has a quite different value. Jeremiah, renowned for connecting the dots between Judah's moral and spiritual poverty and the gathering strength of the threatening Babylonian Empire, uses his money to signal hope in the midst of despair. This prophet of gloom and doom, all of a sudden, has a vision for the future restoration of the Hebrew people. According to the passage we read earlier, he can hardly believe it himself; but then his intuition is confirmed when his cousin, Hanamel, comes to visit him, asking Jeremiah to buy his field at Anathoth. Jeremiah does so, of course, insuring that the deed is kept in a safe place so that at a time in the future when somehow the people of Judah will be able to reclaim their homeland, Jeremiah or his family will be able to begin again on this land at Anathoth.

It is precisely a Jeremiah that our local community is watching for in the events unfolding around the future of Blackberry : we hope for an investor with the vision of Jeremiah who is able to look beyond the present climate of fear and uncertainty to a future season of corporate health, strength, and profitability. Such an outcome is not an impossibility, but it requires knowledge, skill, commitment, and, above all, faith.

Whether we like it or not, money has power in our world – the power to build up or tear down, the power to create or destroy. And in today's readings, we see the example of people and groups of people like the rich man whose affluence insulated him from even noticing Lazarus and his lot; and we have the example of Jeremiah whose faith in God was made visible for others through what most would have judged as a foolhardy investment.

Shortly after Paula and I were first married, we lived in Oakville and lived the life of commuters. Paula took the GO bus and GO train in and out of Toronto every day to her job at National Life. I drove to Brantford every day to my job at Brant Avenue United Church and the music studio from which I taught a large class of students. By coincidence, the minister who had married us in Brantford was called to Maple Grove United Church in Oakville, a medium-size suburban congregation that was suffering from the weekday absence of its congregation – something not uncommon among churches in the cities of commuters that surround Toronto.

Upon accepting the call to Maple Grove Church, our friend Phil saw the potential for the congregation to become a community centre. The church building was in an excellent location with about as much property as we have here at Christ Church. Working with the church's board, he developed a plan to transform the church into a multi-building complex which would house a daycare centre, a public library, a community swimming pool, and meeting space for community groups. The congregation had a hard time imagining the project: they were barely making their budget each year. Phil, however, was like a land-buying Jeremiah in their midst. He challenged them to bring their neighbours to church; he challenged them to give a percentage of their income to the work of the church, not just the customary \$5 a Sunday. I checked in with him after the first few months, and he told me that he noticed that no one who lived in those huge homes and beautiful properties on the Lakeshore in Oakville attended Maple Grove Church – even though most of them could walk to the church from their homes. He told me that he was going to begin visiting them and inviting them to church.

I checked in with him again a few months later. He told me that his visits were going well; that he had met an amazing group of people in his visits along the Lakeshore; that even the poorest had wealth he could only dream of. I asked him, "How do you teach the social gospel in the context of such affluence?" Without missing a beat, he said, "I show them how they can spend some of their money to make positive change for people." He said, "These folks are no different from you and me. Money does not solve any

of their problems: they hunger for meaning and purpose in the same way you and I do. I have become their pastor and, in response, they have joined the community at Maple Grove. We now have all our funding in place to qualify for the community grants to build the Maple Grove Community Centre.”

At the end of Jesus’ retelling of the story of the rich man and Lazarus, he appends a dialogue between the rich man in Hades and Abraham in heaven. The rich man, finally understanding why he is where he is, pleads with Abraham to return Lazarus to earth with a message of warning for the rich man’s brothers who are, we assume, living a self-indulgent life similar to the rich man’s lifestyle before he died. Abraham replies, “No. As do all the rest of the people on earth, they have Moses and the prophets for their instruction.” The rich man doesn’t relent: he argues that if someone returns from the dead, his brothers will take notice and turn their lives around. Abraham, winking at Luke’s readers with the reference of someone returning from the dead – he’s thinking Jesus – says again, “No. If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone *rises* from the dead.”

Whether this last sentence comes from Jesus’ lips or Luke’s pen is unimportant. The message is clear: our call in Moses and the prophets, our call in the gospel of Jesus Christ, is to love God and love our neighbour, especially our neighbours who are in need of gifts that we have and can share. Sometimes money and affluence insulate us from recognizing that we are *individuals in community*; and sometimes money and affluence bring us closer to those in need because we recognize how blessed we are and seek that blessing for others. What Jesus prays for all of his disciples, what Jesus literally died to teach us, was that we all have the capacity to love and to serve our neighbour; that the poorest of the poor is no less wealthy in such riches than the richest of the rich; that the gospel calls us to one another, bidding us to use whatever power we have to make positive change for people; to bring hope, as Jeremiah did with his 17 shekels; to articulate faith; to extend justice and create places in our world where humanity and dignity and security can replace the prevailing moral and spiritual poverty that is disintegrating society and the global community.

The gospel is our toehold on this emerging world Jesus prays for. And he teaches us in this rather fanciful story in today’s Gospel that we have everything we need to bring near God’s reign. It begins with love and moves into serving one another in love. It begins with transformation, *our* transformation as true disciples of the One who came into our world, not to be served, but to serve. We are to love as Christ loves, using whatever gifts we have received to make a difference in our world; to help and to save; to let God’s healing, God’s justice, and God’s Spirit flow through us. Our power, our strength, is God’s Word, living in us. “Glory to God,” our Anglican friends pray often, “whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever. Amen.” [quoted from A Service of the Word, IV Resources. Liturgical Advisory Committee, Church of Ireland and other sources.]