

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 22, 2019

“The Balance(d) Sheet”

Scripture: Luke 16:1-13; 15 Pentecost C (Proper 20)
Note: With inspiration from the work of Robert Capon.

Okay. We get the word straight up this morning. Jesus says you can't serve God and wealth. So... how are we stacking up? Let's take a minute and run the numbers. Okay...

- Percentage of our personal time and financial resources going to religious and charitable purposes —*versus*— percentage of time and financial resources going to leisure and recreation, dining out, travel, gifts, health care, retirement and other personal pursuits and expenditures?
- Percentage of daily work effort devoted explicitly to the service of God and to the promotion of social justice, service to the poor, and love of neighbor —*versus*— the necessary daily effort given to pursuing jobs and enough wealth to have at least a basic living?
- Daily time expenditure spent in prayer and study of Holy Scripture?
- Number of days given over to faith activities or gathered with the Church community —*versus*— the number of days we must spend at work?

I don't know about you, but that sort of analysis kind of worries me, because I get the sinking feeling that I would always come up short in the God column of my life's balance sheet. In fact, I think most everything about our contemporary way of life tends to push our ratios far from the side of the service of God in favor of the service of something else. And the way Jesus calls it, that something else looks a lot like wealth. And though we may consider ourselves people who have ample wealth or

people who don't really have a great deal of wealth in the first place, that doesn't mean that all of us don't have to serve wealth's interests. We have to make a living. We have to pay the mortgage or the rent. We have to look out for our needs or the needs of our families. We have to attend to our health. We have to buy and sell and trade what we have. That's the way the system works. So what can we do, we who would try to serve God but who also must live in a world that runs on the accumulation and transfer of wealth? What can we do when our life balance sheet leans far more to the service of wealth than it does toward the service of God?

Well, I'm going to take the tack suggested by Episcopal priest Robert Capon who once said: "Lucky for us we don't have to deal with a *just* manager."

You and me... we're debtors of a sort. In the moral balance sheet of the human life, we, like all other human beings, don't quite balance the books. We may go about our lives in relatively honest ways practicing a rather modest way of life. But who among us can say we do so perfectly? Have we never fallen short of complete honesty in our dealings with others? Have we always shared generously of our means with others in need? And do we really believe that all our money is simply an amoral device which has never been put to ill use? Though we may have come by our wealth honestly, that doesn't make it all honest wealth. At least some of what we enjoy has

likely, at one time or another, supported an unjust economic system, or contributed to the destruction of our environment, or funded conspicuously lavish lifestyles, or funneled its way through some unjust corporation or government entity. Money is like water: it flows wherever it can, and sometimes it does good, but other times, it may do harm. But it's still water. And money is still money. And in the moral column of our ledgers, I believe we remain, at some level, debtors.

Now imagine in your ordinary daily life that you get a call from your bank one day, and the agent says, "Hey, special promotion for our finest customers! We're knocking your mortgage in half." Well, wouldn't that make our day, and especially if we owed a lot on that house? What a great bank! Or imagine Visa calls and says, "Don't worry, we've worked hard on your behalf; take 40% of your bill on us." Look, if you're living under financial strain, you just got a chunk of your life back. A little more peace of mind. You don't know how your bank or your visa card guy managed it. You don't even know if they did it honestly. You just know it helps. And for that, you are grateful.

So, imagine you get a call from Jesus one day who says, "We've taken a look at the moral and spiritual columns of your balance sheet, and you're lagging a little behind in the God column; you're in the red. But don't worry; I'll take care of that. I

just want you to know, you're in God's good graces. And while we're at it, I would appreciate you putting in a good word about me to others from time to time." Look, if we understand that we have not always done entirely right by God and others, then this is very good news. If we know we are sinners who fall short of the glory of God, and despite the fact that we owe a debt for our sins, that debt is being forgiven?. That is very good news. My spiritual column in that life balance sheet is evened up with the rest of my life. Not by me, but by another, by a manager who isn't really keeping the books on the up and up.

Yes, I admit it. I'm reading this parable entirely allegorically... with Jesus as the unjust manager, the person who goes out to the rich man's debtors and reduces the burden of their spiritual debt. He's the one who gives them back their lives. But the rich man with whom Jesus contends, the master in the parable, is not God. I think that the master with whom this manager contends is what the scriptures call *Mammon*: the inordinate love of wealth, the powers of greed at work in this world. And were Jesus bound entirely to the laws of economy and finance, were Jesus bound to the ways of Mammon, I suppose we would be bound to pay up for every cent we ever owe, every sin we have ever committed, every unjust, ungenerous, uncaring action we have ever entertained. But it isn't justice we receive at the hand of *this* manager, thank

God; it's compassion, forgiveness, generosity, care, and, ultimately, love. Mammon works by debt and payment. God works by grace and kindness.

So what can we do, we who live in a world of material things? Well, for one, I think we can remember that Jesus doesn't say we cannot *have* God and wealth; he says we cannot *serve* God and wealth. To that end —to the service of God— we can do our best to make sure that our material belongings do good not only for ourselves but for others too. Make friends by the use of our wealth. Use portions of our wealth to reduce the burdens of others. And also be generous to others through compassion and forgiveness and patience and love. We cannot serve entirely our own selfish or inordinate needs and try to serve God too, which Jesus says is simply impossible. But perhaps we can be like a shrewd and wise manager and actually serve God *with* wealth by using it to fulfill God's good purposes. And maybe for that, at least we can be commended for being shrewd, for being clever, for being helpful. Like Jesus, the manager we follow.