



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson  
Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
September 30, 2007

These are certainly interesting readings to have on the day we inaugurate our financial stewardship campaign for 2008! I suppose I could try to scare you into pledging by saying that if you don't pledge you'll end up on the wrong side of that chasm in our gospel! But I trust that if I did that, you would tell me what a load of "who ha" that is.

The good news of Jesus is never about guilting us into anything. The good news is about drawing from us the love of God that dwells within us. Sometimes that drawing forth will happen when we see the distance between where we are and where we are called to be; and that distance doesn't feel so good.

We might even feel some guilt about that distance where we have created it. But we feel that guilt because *more* deeply within us, we want to live in communion with Christ our Lord. So if we embrace the grace underneath the guilt, we can be grateful even for the unhappy feelings when they call us forward.

Our readings this morning from 1 Timothy and Luke are about – to use Paul's words – "a love of money that is a root of all kinds of evil" – a misplaced love. In other words, these readings are about being in relationships that have gone awry. In this case, relationships with money and all that money means in our lives. What meaning does money hold in the life of the average person, or maybe the average American? What meaning does money hold in your life?

I think for most of us, having *enough* money means having a certain level of security, the kind of security that comes with being able to provide a roof over your head and food on your table. As Paul puts it when writing to Timothy, “. . . if we have enough food and clothing, we will be content with these.” It’s not a security that everyone has; some choose not to have it, but many don’t have it because for a host of reasons they’re not able to get enough money to provide that security for themselves and for those whom they love.

Money also means independence; having enough money means that we are more free in our relationships with other people. We are not constrained by financial debts to others who might make us do things we would not choose to do. Many of us know families that hold purse strings over one another. I recently read of a man who got a business degree because that’s the only way his father would pay for his college education.

Money is an expression of power. Not the most critical kind of power. For instance, think of the power someone like Mother Theresa had and continues to have after her death, poor though she was in material wealth. The most central kind of power isn’t about having money.

On the other hand, one of the great signs of success for presidential candidates is how much money they are raising. Those who measure such things are watching closely as the third quarter fundraising figures are tabulated. Who will have raised the most money this quarter? Perhaps you, like I, find it disturbing that our political system is so dependent on vast sums of money.

There’s at least one other meaning that money holds in our lives, and that is the primary meaning for Christians, the meaning before us as we begin our financial stewardship campaign: money as a means to serve God. That is money’s primary meaning for us all: the call upon us to use our financial resources just as we are called to use *all* our resources: as a way to nurture the primary relationship of our lives, our relationship with God.

When you think of relationships in your lives, what do you think of? I think of my family; I think of my love for my wife, Carol, and for my children, Andrew and Elizabeth; and I think of their love for me.

I also think of all of you, some of whom I know well and others I barely know at all. I think of your love and valuing of me as it gets expressed through the structures of the church and sometimes individually. And I think of my love for you, as I do my best to express that love through serving you.

I also think of my mother, and the way that relationship has changed over the years, and the ways it will continue to change as we both live into the future, as she grows older, and as I do, too.

I think of all the people I've had the delight to know through the years, some in the church, and some outside of it. Some still living with us here on earth, and others now living in the fullness of God's presence.

I think of those whom I pray for still, even though I haven't the faintest idea of where they are or what they're doing. I think of Randy, whom I met when I was in seminary. I was working for a time as a chaplain in a jail, and Randy was being sent to prison for armed robbery; he was one of those rare people I counseled who admitted that he had indeed committed the crime of which he was accused.

And when I think of relationships, I also think of my cats. I have relationships with them, too! Something dog lovers might not understand.

And I think of God. God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I think of my relationship with each of those persons of the trinity. I think of what builds that relationship, of what serves my relationship with God, and of what distracts from it. The way I spend my time can do either: build or detract from that relationship.

And so can the way I spend my money: like all of us, I have to be deliberate about using my financial resources to serve the power of God, that power made perfect in weakness, to use Paul's words again; the weakness of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. I can use my money to serve God in many ways and in many places; but in few of those places, will I hear of the power of the cross in our lives; in few places do I sing its glories; in few places am I fed with the security that enables me to go out into the world with the strength and the courage to climb up onto that cross with Jesus in my daily life.

You've heard me say before and no doubt you'll hear me say again that the offerings we pledge to the church each year are not primarily about meeting the church budget. I grant you that's a nice byproduct. But if that's all the further we look, we run the risk of being only a little bit different from a social club.

The financial offerings we promise each year are about our relationship with God – a relationship that gets lived out here and nurtured here so that we have the “strength and courage” to go out into the world and *continue* what begins here and is sustained here. Our financial offerings are about expressing with our resources the properly placed loves in our lives. They express that God is first and that we are committed to keeping God first. Not second, not third. Not when it's convenient. Always first.

That's the considerable wisdom of the tithe in our tradition. Yes, it's Biblical. But why is it Biblical? It's Biblical because long before scripture was ever written, people came to understand that they needed to make a substantial commitment of their financial resources in order to sustain God as the first priority in their lives.

In reality, that ten percent is simply a symbol of the 100% of our lives that we offer back to God because our love for God is total, complete, one hundred percent, without reservation. We know that in the depth of our hearts, even if it's not perfectly expressed in our lives, that's where God is. First.

And, by God's loving grace, first is where God will stay.