

## Sacred Squandering

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Text: Luke 15:11-32

### INTRODUCTION

It is dangerous to preach familiar texts, because our listeners may click off before we even begin. But the story of the dysfunctional family in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke is so beloved in our tradition, that we need not fear a nodding-off crowd—particularly if we couple it with “filthy lucre.”

According to most commentators, the parable of the prodigal son has been badly misnamed. By focusing on the profligate child, we tend to miss the compassion of the generous father. “The Parable of the Loving Father” might be more appropriate. Or maybe even the shocking title, “The Parable of the Prodigal Father.” For those of us who care about what is fair, what is just, what is right, there is a sense that the father’s behavior in this story is a bit outrageous. Though he does not squander money and riches as does his younger son, squander he does, nonetheless. The God in this story shamelessly squanders grace.

Squandering grace is a pretty good place to begin talking about financial stewardship, for we are called as Christians to respond with extravagant gratitude to the elegant gift of life. My earliest memories of worship are entirely positive. I can see and feel my six-year-old self seated in a pew—lovingly swamped by all the big people around me, totally in awe of the organ and the singing and the hushed silence of the hour. Boredom was absolutely the last thing on my mind. Though I didn’t understand what was going on, nonetheless, I experienced the holy. And each week I waited for the high point of the service. With a quarter grasped in my hand, I waited for the velvet offering plate to pass by. It was at that moment that I could finally respond to the goodness I had been feeling in that pew.

The stewardship message is clear. God’s grace can change us from “careful” people into squandering people—fools for Christ with our money.

### SERMON

Today I have the privilege of preaching about what none of us wants to talk about. More taboo than sex, more contentious than politics, today we are going to talk about money. We’re going to talk about your money and my money, which, theologically, is really God’s money. My colleague, Rabbi Brenner, is very good at talking about money—much to the discomfort of some of his parishioners. In a sermon last year, Reeve reminded the members of the Bethesda Jewish Congregation, that the most religious book ever written is not the Bible. The most religious book ever written is your checkbook—and mine. What is really important to us? What really matters to us? Who or what is it that really rules over our life? Our checkbook—or our automated online balance sheet—gives the most honest answer to these questions.

In his death—and it turns out in his life—the golfer Payne Stewart gave us all a lesson in faithful living. His memorial service in 1999, with its focus on celebration and thanksgiving and the joy of heaven, reminded us that, for Christians, death is always swallowed up in victory. And the news that he had given \$1.4 million to his Baptist Church in Orlando—well, such an example inspires us to say what we believe with the holy stuff of money. Payne Stewart’s checkbook told the world clearly what was important in his life.

One writer has suggested that there are three ways of giving. There is grudge giving. There is drudge giving. And there is thanks giving (R.D. Rodenmayer, adapted). The distinction goes something like this. You get your pledge card in the mail. How do you respond? Well, one way might go like this: “Oh, no. Here we go again. Money, money, money. That’s all this church ever seems to want. What right do they have to invade my private life? I’ve got bills to pay. I’ve got places to go. I’ve got things to buy. I attend worship. I drag my kids to Sunday school. I usher six times a year. What more do they want? And if money is such a big deal, how come they spent so much on a printed brochure and first class postage? I guess I’ll fill out this darn card just to get them off my back.” That, my friends is grudge giving, built upon resentment. And, did you notice that somehow the “they” never includes the “me?”

A second response might go something like this. You get your pledge card in the mail. “Oh, oh. It’s that time of year again. Boy, do I hate it when these stewardship mailings come. They make me feel so guilty. I know that I should be more generous, because it is my duty as a good Christian to support the program and mission of the church. The Bible says that I should tithe. The Bible says that relatively wealthy people should give more—and set an example. I know that raising my pledge is the thing I should and ought to do. So I’ll force myself to do it. BUT. They better appreciate the sacrifice this represents.” That, my friends, is drudge giving. And dutiful as it is, it never feels very good.

A third possible response actually has very little to do with money. It goes something like this: Your telltale envelope arrives in the mail. And you say to yourself, “Oh, good. This must be my pledge card. This gives me another chance to respond to all the goodness in my life. I really have been blessed—family, intelligence, satisfying work, a beautiful autumn season, a mind and body to grow and stretch and enjoy God’s world. The Bible reminds us “that the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Psa. 24:1) I am so grateful for the fullness of my life, for the goodness of God’s generosity to me and to this world. And I so much want to bring fullness and goodness to those in the world whose lives are not as comfortable as mine. Hmmm—the church is asking for a significant hike this year in order to turn around a pattern of using year-end surpluses to balance the budget. Makes sense—and besides, there seems to be lots of new energy at the church this year. I guess I’ll say thanks to God by increasing my pledge, while I continue to give generously to the United Way, to the college alumni fund, to Bethesda Cares, to the presidential campaign fund. In all areas of my giving I want to reflect my Christian values.” This, my friends, is one example of thanks giving. Perhaps a bit utopian, but biblical nonetheless.

At first glance, our gospel lesson for this morning has nothing to do with money. This most

beloved of all stories is one of those parables that begs us to respond—to crawl inside the words and become actors in the drama. There are, of course, three main characters with whom we can identify. And if we are serious about our Christian faith, we will, at some point or other, identify with all three of them. The younger son is the hedonist within us—the one who squanders all that he has been given, who gives nothing back but heartache and worry and grief. Gratitude as an attitude is absolutely alien to this guy. Why? Because he thinks that he deserves what he gets. Because he craves only what he wants—voracious desires that must be filled now, here, completely.

In a recent *New York Times Magazine*, the novelist Richard Russo has written about the Me Millennium. He makes the point that the most significant change in the last one thousand years has been the shift in the central focus of life. Whereas 1000 years ago God was clearly the center of all things—a God who gave order to the universe and a moral structure and purpose to our daily living, today, human beings—particularly the individual self—have become the center of the world. And though God may still be a vague ghost hovering around the periphery of our consciousness, what really orders our life is the power and passion of our own persona.

In many ways, our modern concept of money reflects this shift in focus. Whereas coins first emerged as a means to connect with God, to gain entry to the sacred meals of worship, today coins—money—is a different kind of ticket—a ticket to the good life, the good life as defined by things, stuff, and investments. The idea that money comes from God as a blessing, the idea that money belongs to God as a form of thanks giving—well, this kind of thinking is totally alien to our contemporary world. In 1994, Americans spent seven billion more on lottery tickets than they gave to their churches. And each year as a nation we spend more on chewing gum, more on cosmetics, more on soft drinks than we do on the global mission of the church. Last year, we Americans gave 2% of our gross national product to charity. This is the same percentage that we have given for the last thirty years, even though average earnings have risen by 200% during that time. One rather blunt preacher has suggested that the problem with most of us is that our net income doesn't keep up with our gross habits. In some ways, the piggy prodigal is the perfect poster child for our modern money mania. All too often, when it comes to our money, we grab it, we hoard it, and we squander it on that which does not last, and on that which does not satisfy.

But, my friends, let us not forget that there are two more characters in our gospel story this morning with whom we can identify. There is, of course, the older brother—the loyal son who sticks around, this bitter do-gooder who combines the worst of both grudge giving (resentment) and drudge giving (duty). In refusing to be gracious and forgiving, in insisting on being rewarded for his dutiful living, this “responsible” son does not squander money. But squander he does, nonetheless. He squanders goodness. He squanders the quiet consistent affection that his father has showered upon him. And with the cold clutch of his heart, he squeezes all the joy out of his living.

Thank goodness there is a third actor in this drama—the character of the father, the God figure in this story. And this is the character we are called to identify with if we hope to grow in the fullness and wholeness of the Christian faith. This father is so relieved, so grateful when his

wayward boy returns, that he runs to greet him, showering the prodigal with kisses and blessings and hugs—even before the son has uttered a single word of apology. This father embodies for us the purest form of thanks giving. But lest we sentimentalize the story too much, it is essential that we acknowledge that this father figure is just as much a squanderer as are the other two. The only difference is that his is a sacred kind of squandering, a squandering that never runs out—the ever flowing, always abundant grace of God. My friends, to squander grace lavishly and purposely is the calling of those created in the image of a graceful God. To squander grace is to exorcize the drudge and grudge in our lives—and to embrace a lifestyle of thanks giving. Yes, to squander grace is the affirmation of the central theological tenet of our faith—that we are saved not by our good works, but by our squandering God’s amazing grace. And all we can do in response is to shamelessly squander back—to extravagantly return all that God has freely given to us.

Every marriage has its strengths and its weaknesses. One of the strengths of the marriage that Sim and I enjoy is our common view of money. From the first day of our marriage we have shared some fundamental financial values. First of all, our money is a trust given to us by God for the sole purpose of expressing abundant life—for ourselves, for our children, and for God’s larger world. Secondly, we believe that indebtedness is irresponsible; and so, except for our mortgage and our car payments, we pay off our bills completely every month. This, of course, restricts what we buy, but that has turned out to be a good thing. Thirdly, we believe that squirreling away lots of money is to deny the trustworthy promises of our dependable God; and so, we have no long-term life insurance, and our investments are limited to college funds for our children. We trust that the pension plan required by our denomination will be an adequate foundation for our retirement years. Finally, we believe that tithing—giving a minimum of 10% of our gross income to a variety of charitable causes—is a non-negotiable absolute in our lives, and at least half of our tithe goes to the church.

Two weeks ago, when I filled out our pledge card, it was with a certain kind of sadness. For the first time since being in this place, I was not able to match the challenge given to all of us by our session leadership. With two full-college tuitions facing us next year, the crunch has really hit. Though our family’s overall giving will still fall within a tithe, though we are increasing our monthly pledge from \$675 to \$700, this 3.6% increase does not match the 10 to 15% proposed by the financial stewardship lay ministry. But you know what? This year, that’s just the way it is. And it’s okay. Our God—a generous God who squanders grace and not judgment—will certainly understand.

My friends, money is wonderful stuff. It is wonderful because it is a symbol of God’s wonderful grace. As we continue to pray and play with the money in our lives, may each one of us practice thanks giving. And, to use Madge’s words of a couple of weeks ago, may we give—not until it hurts, but until it feels really, really good.

This is the good news of the gospel. May it be so, for you and for me. Amen.