



Keeping It in Perspective



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

October 14, 2018
The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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A few weeks ago, our son, James, had an appointment with the eye doctor, something he's been doing every year since he was about ten years old, except this was the first time he ever scheduled the appointment by himself, without my wife or I having to prompt him or remind him. So, Susan and I felt like this was a big step, like after all these years, there might actually be some hope for the kid.

But, then came the day of the appointment.

James called me as soon as he finished with the doctor, and right away, by the sound of his voice, I could tell something was wrong. "What's the matter," I asked. "Are you okay? Are your eyes alright?"

"No, I'm not alright," he replied. "They charged me \$350!"

Apparently, James needed a new prescription, new lenses for his glasses, new contacts, and with the doctor appointment itself, the cost added up.

I listened as James explained all of this, and realizing he was physically okay, that there was nothing wrong with his eyes, my anxiety started to lessen, so finally, as calmly as possible, I said to him, "Look, bud, most of that will be covered by insurance. You'll get the money back. It'll be alright."

"I know it's be covered by insurance!" He snapped. "They gave me the form for the insurance company, but they charged my credit card \$350! It'll be weeks before I get that back."

At this point, I was almost sorry I answered the phone, because nothing I said was right, but then, just to top it all off, James said, "What if you and Mom give me the \$350 now, and then, when I get the money back from the insurance company, I'll give that to you...?"

A lot of us are just like James. Money makes us anxious and tense. We worry about how much we have, or more specifically, how much we don't have. We hear how much it will cost to pay for college, and for retirement, and for healthcare, and our stress level goes through the roof, because we think: there's no way we'll ever have enough! We'll never be able to afford all that. It is no wonder couples argue more about money than any other topic. They argue over spending their money, and saving their money, and finding the right balance. Money just has that effect on us – it makes us crazy sometimes. And, if we're not careful, if we're not thoughtful and deliberate in our relationship with money, money can take a hold of our heart.

We see this in our Gospel reading today.

The man who appears in the story is commonly referred to as the rich, young ruler. He was a good and decent man, upright and faithful, with a deep commitment to following the Lord.

When the young man saw Jesus, standing right there in front of him, the young man couldn't keep himself from running up: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Some people in the gospels asked Jesus questions in order to trick him or trap him – we saw this happening in last Sunday's reading – but the rich, young ruler was not one of those people. His question was honest and sincere. He was genuinely interested in knowing the answer, and if Jesus would only share it with him, if Jesus would only tell the young man what to do, he would do it. It didn't matter what it was, or how high the bar was. The young man wouldn't give it a second thought. He wouldn't hesitate. Whatever Jesus told him to do, the rich, young ruler would just do it.

But, the young man couldn't possibly imagine what Jesus would say: go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and then, come, follow me.

When the rich, young ruler heard that, his heart just sank because, despite his good intentions, despite the yearning in his soul, there was no way he could sell all of his possessions. Give them all up? Get rid of them? That was crazy. There was just no way. He needed all that stuff. He wanted all his stuff. Jesus was right there in front of the young man, offering him a better life, offering him the very kind of life he wanted, the kind of life he asked about, but the young man couldn't take it. He couldn't reach out and grab hold of it, because money was getting in the way, and that's sad.

But, money has that power over us.

Many of us believe all of our problems would go away if only we had more money. We'd be happier, healthier, more secure in our relationships and our life, free to do whatever we want, and so we chase after money, working harder and harder, putting in more and more hours. And yet, all we're doing is spinning our wheels. Like a hamster in a cage, we run around like crazy, never getting anywhere, and without even noticing it, we slip into a life of unrest and unhappiness. We become disengaged from our true selves and the kind of life we want to have, because money offers illusions and false promises. Money is a false idol.

That's why Jesus spoke more about money than almost any other topic. Jesus understood the connection between money and our overall health and well being. Jesus never said money was bad, and he never condemned people for having money. Jesus simply pointed out that money can get in the way, of our relationships with each other, our relationship with God, our relationship with the world around us, and so we need to keep money in its place, not making it a golden calf, but seeing money as it is: a means of exchange, not an end in itself.

The theology of stewardship helps us to keep money in perspective. Stewardship begins with appreciation, and it grows out of gratitude. God has blessed every one of us in many different ways, and it is important for us to be conscious of those blessings and say "thank you" to God, just as we say "thank you" to anyone else. We do that by giving back to God, taking some of what God has given us and putting it back to use for God's work in the world. We thank God by sharing our blessings, offering them to the service of others and the advancement of God's kingdom. At its heart, stewardship is an understanding that everything we are and everything we have, including our financial resources, comes from God. God just lets us borrow it for a while.

People often ask me why I give to the church. "The church already has a lot of money," they'll say. "There are so many other good causes you could support." And, I get it. But, for me, the reasons are pretty simple:

Giving to the church is about my relationship with God. God has given me so much: my family, my friends, all of you. What little money I have is nothing in comparison, and so I am happy to give some back in order to continue God's work in the world.

The church is where the work of God happens. The church is the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Jesus, sharing his love with the world, and as a result, the Church is constantly striving for justice and peace among all people. Throughout history, many of the great social changes have been brought about by people of faith, because the Church dreams of a better world and works to bring that dream – God's dream – to reality.

There is no place like Grace Church. I have said it before, and I'll say it again: This is not just a good church; this is not just a great church; This is an incredible church! There are very few places like this. Our vision is to be that "city on a hill" where people of all races and cultures can come to build their relationships with God and others. And, I am very proud to say: we are living into our vision, at a time when our country, and our world, need a shining city on a hill radiating compassion, and hope, understanding, and love.

Amen.