

**THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**Proper 23**

**October 11, 2009B**

**Mark 10:17-21**

I've always been fascinated when it comes to where we most commonly find the words, "In God We Trust." And I don't know if it's coincidence or just my perception, but I recently looked at a one dollar bill and a one hundred dollar bill – and found that the "In God We Trust" seemed to be in bigger and bolder print on the larger bill! Is it God in whom we place our trust as individuals and as a nation, or is it in the almighty dollar?

I'm going to talk about money today – and I'm going to start by saying that I like it! I'm sure I'm not the only one here this morning who does. As many of you know, I lived with a vow of poverty for many years in my previous life as a Franciscan friar. What this basically meant was that I renounced possessions in favor of a common life in community. I didn't do what St. Francis, the founder of the Franciscans, did when he heard the words of Jesus in today's gospel. He literally put those words into practice. But I did try to live very simply. Whatever salary I earned went into a common account to serve the needs of our community. I really never paid much attention to money. I didn't have to. I didn't pay the bills, had no mortgage on a house or car payments and didn't have to worry about kids or college tuition. For me, money was a tool. If I had some, I generously shared it. And if I didn't, I depended upon the generosity of others, which oftentimes was not easy for an independent person like myself.

Imagine my surprise in finding out as my father and mother reached their senior years that they would often go with friends on day trips to casinos in Atlantic City to spend their time and money on slot machines. Back in the 1980's the casino industry in New Jersey attracted senior citizens who came in droves by buses each day to spend their money gambling. My parents enjoyed these trips and would share with me the fun they had going with their retired friends. I had never been to a casino nor did I have any desire of ever setting foot into one. I couldn't ever imagine myself spending time putting coins into slot machines all in hope of hitting a jackpot – that is, until the summer of 1987 when I took my mother to Atlantic City! I know I shared this story once several years ago but it bears repeating, especially during our present stewardship appeal.

My dad had died the previous year and I went to New Jersey to spend a week of vacation with my mother. I had taken her car for an oil change and was jogging on the road back to mom's house, thinking about what we could do together that she'd enjoy doing, when the idea hit me. It's a good thing I was jogging in the rain because I couldn't tell whether it was water from the rain or a cold sweat I felt when the thought

occurred to take mom to the casinos of Atlantic City! What I didn't realize then, however, was that I was about to enter a world I would actually enjoy far more than I was willing to admit. We went that afternoon and I soon discovered that I loved playing the slot machines. Winning \$1500 on my first visit certainly helped to initiate me into the world of casino gambling. For several years, people were impressed with how often I would take time to visit my mother. The truth be told, it was a growing addiction to the world of playing slot machines which partially motivated me to visit mom, especially since she lived so close to Atlantic City.

I learned a lesson during those years which I won't ever forget: it's so easy to compromise what we believe when it comes to money. A preoccupation with money can dull our sensitivities. It can clog our spiritual arteries. It can make us stingy, narrow-minded and selfish.

Somewhere in our lives we're taught that money is the solution to most, if not all, of our problems. If we just have more, we'll be OK. The young man in today's gospel (whom Jesus looked at with love), seeks the wisdom of Jesus. He is a rich young man for whom money is not a problem. But it doesn't seem to satisfy the deeper hunger of his heart. In his spiritual quest to seek eternal life, he's shocked to hear Jesus' response to his question. I agree with Barbara Brown Taylor's comment on this gospel when she says that "most of us wish the young ruler had never shown up in the pages of scripture, for he causes Jesus to say one of the hardest lines in the whole Bible" ("The Opposite of Rich," *The Preaching Life*, Cambridge: Cowley, 1993, pp. 121-126). This gospel goes against the grain of our sensitivities and our sensibilities as much for us today as it did for that rich young man. Jesus speaks of money not as the solution to our problems but as a potential cause of problems we could face when it comes to our spiritual health and future life with God.

It's been said that money is the root of all evil, but it really isn't. The *love* of money is. And it's not just those who have money who need to pay close attention to this gospel, because we can be preoccupied with a love of money when we don't have it as when we do! Someone once said that we listen to the gospel as if we have no money and then we spend our money as if we've never heard the gospel. We know we can't buy our way into heaven and even though some people in our culture consider material wealth as a sign of God's approval and blessing, Jesus warns his disciples that money can actually be a liability and not an asset when it comes to the health and wellness of our souls. When we place our trust in money, we love money and use people. God's plan for us in Christ is to love people and use money.

I think we often depend far more on our own resources than we do on God, perhaps giving only lip service to our trust in God by the way we act. Just think for a moment. How much time do we spend in prayer, acknowledging our dependence on God for our daily bread, the sustenance our spirit needs in order to live each day with a conscious awareness that who we are and all we have is God's gift to us?

The young man came to Jesus because he was searching for something all the money in the world couldn't give him. He was hungry for something money can't buy which had to do with the deeper yearning of his heart. But his love of money became an obstacle.

I suspect that we're here today for perhaps the same reason - a hunger to be fed by God's Word and at the table where we are offered the bread of heaven. There's something we discover through our faith in God through Christ we might not always be able to put into words, something money can't buy, like faith and trust in a God who loves us with an unconditional love; like the confidence and security we experience in friends who accept us, who believe in us and love us just the way we are; like the kindness and generosity of strangers who awaken in us a desire to look beyond ourselves and our own needs into a world where our gifts and the needs of others meet.

"Put your money where your mouth is," is an expression we've all heard (and perhaps have used ourselves). But it's really a matter of putting our money where our hearts are to be found. And if our hearts are set on our love for God, perhaps we need from time to time, to take a better look at our relationship to money.

In God we trust!

Amen.

Amen.

*Bob Hudak  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Greenville, NC*