

**“The Church and Dishonest Wealth”**  
**Sermon: September 22, 2013**  
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In this diocese when a church is searching for a new Rector, they will ask the finalists, the two or three that they have selected before they make their final selection, to come to the church, celebrate service and preach on the gospel. About two and a half years ago, the verses you just heard in today’s gospel were the verses that your finalists were asked to preach on. I came here, I did a service and I preached on this gospel to about six people of the Search Committee. They gave me the job anyway. So I thought that you would like to hear what it is I had to say.

It was a hot, dry afternoon when the Swami entered the small Indian village. The merchants were about to close their stands against the mid-day heat and retire to their homes for a mid-day meal. The Swami went first to the baker and asked the price of a loaf of bread. He then went to the grocer’s stand and asked the price of a piece of fruit. Finally, he went to the potter’s stall selected a bowl and asked if he could borrow the bowl for a few minutes before he purchased it. Since he was a Holy Man and intrigued by his behavior, the potter lent the Swami the bowl. The Swami bent over and placed a handful of dirt from the street in the bottom of the bowl. Next, the Swami broke a small branch off of a nearby tree and stripped it of its leaves. Finally, the Swami went to the well in the center of town and poured several hands full of water onto the dirt in the bowl. Every eye in the village was upon the Holy Man as he sat on the ground, bowl in his lap, and began to stir his mixture while counting each stir.

Ten stirs, then twenty then fifty stirs, the Holy Man sat cross legged eyes closed stirring with his stick. “Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred!” At the century mark, the Swami opened his eyes, reached into the bowl and pulled out several pieces of bright, shiny gold. He traded the pieces to the baker for bread, the grocer for fruit and the potter for his bowl. The Swami left the amazed villagers and sat under shade tree to eat. Most of the villagers were too astonished to speak to Swami; one young man’s curiosity and avarice were stronger than his fear and timidity. “Holy One, do not be angry with me for disturbing your meal. But I must know the secret of turning mud into gold. Ask of me what you want and I will do it, but I must know your secret.” The Holy Man looked up from his simple meal and smiled. “Young Man, I have no secret. I simple take dirt form a village, mix it with water from the same village and stir it one hundred times with a stick from a village tree. When I finish I reach in the bowl and out comes gold. “So all I need is dirt, water, a bowl, and a stick?” asked the young man. “That is all”, said the Swami.

The Young Man ran to his home as fast as he could to fetch a bowl. Next, he broke off a small branch suitable for stirring, picked up a hand full of dirt, and fetched several handfuls of water. With great anticipation, the young man began to count his stirs just as the Swami instructed. When he reached 100 he held his breath as he reached into the bowl for gold, but when he opened his hand all he had were balls of mud. Convinced that he had missed something in this simple recipe, the young man tried again with a different bowl, a different stick, and dirt from the other side of town.

At the end of the day, the exhausted young man found the Swami still sitting in the shade of the tree. “Holy One,” he began, “I have labored all afternoon. Dozens of times I have failed to turn mud into gold. Surely there is a secret that you did not reveal to me.” “Let me see,” said the Swami, “Did you take dirt from the street?” “Yes,” said the young man. “Did you place it in the bowl with water from a local well?” “Yes,” said the young man. “Did you stir it exactly 100 times with a stick from a local tree?” “Yes, yes, yes, I did all of that dozens of times and all I received for my effort was a bowl of mud.”

The Swami seemed puzzled by the young man’s failure then suddenly his eyes lit up with awareness. “Oh young man, I do apologize, I did forget to tell you one thing.” “I knew it,” said the young man, “tell me the

secret.” “Young man, there is not a secret. I simply forgot to tell you that in order to make the mud into gold, you must never once think about the gold.”

Jesus said, “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” The purpose of a church in a community is to bless the community. We the church, have what the world needs: the confident proclamation of the coming of the kingdom, the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sin, and the certain promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. We, the church, have the true riches of eternity, but I would guess that if you asked the average citizen of Martinsville which would be a greater blessing, a new church or a new Toyota truck plant? The truck plant would win hands down as the greater blessing. I would guess that in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the factories that press and cut leaves into blocks of chewing tobacco would have won in a similar competition. Then in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if I had asked a similar question but exchanged Bassett furniture for Toyota truck, Bassett probably would have been seen as the greater blessing.

In 1925, forty percent of Martinsville-Henry County worked in the furniture business. In 1948, 1 in 5 workers in Martinsville was a textile employee. Since 2000, Bassett, Hooker, Pulaski, Ridgeway, and Vaughan have all closed their plants. Nine thousand jobs in Henry County were lost to global free trade and unemployment in Martinsville is now 16.9%, the highest in the state. And that Toyota truck plant would be a great blessing, until it too was gone. I hope we all see that the greater blessing throughout the history of Martinsville and into the future is the faithful church.

The wealth produced by the tobacco producers, textile manufactures, and furniture builders was dishonest wealth not because it was wealth produced by fraud or theft, but because it deceived people into thinking it could bless them in ways it could not. Jesus said, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches.” The purpose of a church in a community is to bless the community. We have what the world needs: the confident proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God, the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sin, and the certain promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. These, of course, are our true riches. However, we, the church also have buildings, paid staff, endowments, and rental income and the contributions of pledge and plate to carry out our ministries. Jesus has warned us that unless we are faithful with this “dishonest wealth” we will not be entrusted with our true riches.

How we handle our wealth corporately, as a church, and individually, in our own financial dealings, have consequences for our spiritual life, both corporately and individually. Christ Episcopal Church has a ministry of blessing. Often, there is a monetary component attached to the priceless blessing. Episcopalians are sacramental people; we believe grace is incarnational. We believe that things like bread, wine, water, oil are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. Someone from our church purchases the bread, wine, oil and some one pays the water bill. And, we pay for candles, electricity, for lights and air conditioning. Prayers are said over the bread and wine so the church pays a priest to bless what is blessed. Blessings take place and flow from buildings that require care and upkeep. Yet, the true riches of the church are this ministry of blessing the community by proclaiming, forgiving, and declaring life in Christ. Much of the burden placed on the church leadership, both the lay and ordained leadership, is the anxiety of financial responsibilities. We declare Jesus is Lord, and we mean it. But, often it feels like the Master we serve, even in the church, is wealth. This is why we started with the story of the Swami and the gold. I like this story because it portrays well what the churches, the vestry, the clergy, the membership’s attitude toward wealth should be.

Blessing the community is why there is a church in the community. But, to do our ministry we must raise money, to do our ministry we must spend money. The secret is that we must never think about the money. Jesus gently goads the children of light for not being as shrewd as the children of this age. We must be shrewd but we must not serve wealth. Like the Swami, we must get things done and sometimes that takes money, but we cannot think about the money. We must focus on the ministry; we must bless the community, and never doubt for a moment that we are being blessed. Amen.