20 Pentecost, RCL 25C
Sirach 35.12-17 Psalm 84.1-6 2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18 Luke 18.9-14

We're in the middle of our fall pledge campaign,
and our lessons this morning have some things to say
about our relationship with money.

But before we get to that, take a moment to notice
a couple of other truths Jesus is teaching us.

The first truth is one that if you're lucky a parent or grandparent
or teacher or coach taught you when you were young:
comparing yourself to others will get you nowhere.
It's a fool's game.

The Pharisee compared himself to a tax collector,
among the lowest of the low,
and nobody, especially God, was impressed.

The second truth is one that family systems therapists teach us,
and that support groups like Al-Anon and Nar-Anon teach us.
That truth is this:
if you want to change the world, change yourself.

The Pharisee can't change the thieves, rogues, adulterers, & tax collectors
he compares himself to,
just like you can't change all those people
you think are ruining this country.

That's a hard truth but the even more difficult version of it,
is that you can't change the people in your family who are struggling,
can't change the ones who are falling apart.

At the end of the movie version of 'A River Runs Through It'
Tom Skerrit says,
"Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give,
or more often than not,
the part of ourselves we have to give is not wanted."

"But we can still love them.
Love completely, without complete understanding."

You CAN love them, all of them, and you should.
But you can't change them.

The only person you can change is yourself,
and the first step to changing yourself is standing before God
and saying, "Be merciful to ME, a sinner."

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Now let's talk about money.

I hope you will decide to make a financial pledge
to this parish's life and ministries.

I think we have a long track record of faithfully and responsibly
using the money you have given over the years.
The vestry minutes and finance reports are there for you to read
in the reception area,
and we just got the 2024 audits for both the parish and preschool.

I hope you will pledge,
and today I want to focus on the spiritual benefits of being generous,
because being faithful with your money is a lifetime process.

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When Emily and I came to Holy Trinity
we were still recovering from the financial upheaval of seminary.
We were still learning to control our money
rather than let it control us.

Maybe some of you have a similar story,
starting in disorder and learning to ask God to guide you
in getting your financial lives in order.

Just before we got here Emily and I had learned to live on a budget,
and soon we were saving 10% of our income for charitable giving,
most of which went to the church.

When we started that journey,
I had this idea that once we ordered our finances,
once we were able to be secure and generous,
our spiritual growth around money would be accomplished.
Check-plus for us and on to the next thing.

Of course I was wrong.
Because after learning to budget and tithe came bigger financial issues.
Selling a house we'd bought just before the real estate crash,
buying a house in Avondale
(back when you could afford houses in Avondale),
saving for retirement, thinking about college for your children.

Each season I needed God in a new way,
but still I secretly hoped that when things got under control
I wouldn't need to bother God with that part of my life anymore.

With each new step, though, I found I needed God in a new way,
because it turns out that comfort and stability
bring new temptations - who knew?!?

Like the temptation to look down on people
whose lives are not as ordered or stable as ours.

"At least I've got MY act together!"
I've caught myself thinking in a perfect Pharisaical voice.
"Thank God I'm not like those OTHER people."

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For me, stability brought the temptation to think
that generosity & humility might not be as important for us anymore,
because now we have control over our money.
Because now we feel secure.

You know, every time I look at the student loans we've taken out
for James' college, this wicked little thought pops into my head:
"If we don't hold back 10% of our income this year, we won't need a loan."
"In fact, we can pay the ones we have off a lot quicker
if we don't pledge to Holy Trinity."

Every year that thought comes back,
whispering to me how maybe we don't need to give away
a tenth of our income EVERY year because, you know,
we ALREADY do so much.

Plus, Holy Trinity has that Giles money now. It'll be fine.
I mean, at least I'm not like those other people!

Okay, sidebar about the Giles money.
First, if we all took the approach I was talking about,
this parish would close its doors in 5 years.

Second, if I took that approach I wouldn't be a follower of Jesus.
I'd be a customer, a consumer of Jesus-themed content.

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The next temptation is one that hasn't come to us yet,
but I see it a lot in people just a few years older than us.
It seems to affect people who raised their kids in church
but now have watched them go off and start lives of their own.

You career settles down.
Life settles down and all of a sudden church feels less important.
I wonder if maybe charity feels less important, too,
if humbling yourself before God feels less important now
Because life is steady. I see that happen around here sometimes.

And then comes the legacy season.
You've had your career. You've provided for your family.
You've done your duty.
Now you want to make a difference out in the world.

Thinking about legacy is good but it carries new temptations.
Is your legacy about YOU or about God?
Is it about YOU or about the people who need help?

In order for the legacy season to be all it can be,
you have to humble yourself before God all over again.
You have to identify and confess before God
the sins that want to corrupt that beautiful desire you have
to leave something behind.

Maybe more than any other,
the legacy season is when we most need to pray
those difficult words Jesus taught us: thy will be done.

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Finally, if God is merciful, you come to the last season of your financial life,
the one that accompanies you to the grave.

What should those last 5 or 10 years of life on Earth look like
as you slow down and prepare to see God face to face?
What will faithfulness look like in this last season?

Is your financial life ordered for these last years?
Have you made the arrangements you need to make?

If you think you'll have wealth left over,
is it directed in a way that honors the God who brought you this far,
or will it just be about YOU?

What temptations are you facing in this last season?
How will you cry out, even now,
"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

To those of you in the last chapter of your earthly journey:
you are the trailblazers showing the rest of us what we'll need to do
when our it's our turn.
So be faithful. And share your wisdom with us.

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We're asking you to make a financial pledge for the coming year.
We're hoping to increase the number of pledges
because it's necessary for our common life and ministries.

But even more than it helps our budget,
increasing our financial spiritual maturity
increases the overall spiritual maturity of this parish.

So if you haven't pledged before, or haven't in a while,
prayerfully consider it.
But most of all, remember Jesus' lesson.

Remember that no matter how much or how little money you have,
no matter how respected or how looked down upon you may be,
the real work is always to stand before God each new day
and confess YOUR ongoing, daily need for God's mercy.

"God, be merciful to me - a sinner!"

Amen.