

HAITI SUNDAY | SERMON

Luke 16:1-13 | September 22, 2019 | Rev. Catherine Healy | Church of St. Paul & the Redeemer

Before I even started as rector at SPR, I was already committed to going on this year's Haiti trip. I had never been to Haiti, and was excited to see it for the first time. I couldn't wait to worship with our partner parish of St. Patrick's, in the church building that SPR had helped rebuild, and I was especially excited about meeting all the kids at St. Patrick's School.

Then, on Valentine's Day, the State Department issued a Level 4: Do Not Travel warning for Haiti. I was unfamiliar with the level system, so I thought: *Maybe there are dozens of countries on the "Do Not Travel" list. Maybe it's not that big a deal.*

I looked at the list. There are not dozens of countries on it. It is, in fact, extremely short.

So I looked at the recommended precautions for traveling to a Level 4 country.¹ These included:

- Appoint one contact person to speak with hostage-takers.
- Leave DNA samples with your doctor in case your family needs them.
- Make your funeral wishes clear.

I was not at all sure what to think. Would the trip be canceled? Would it go ahead? Should I try to insist that we go, or that we stay?

Fortunately, other members of the SPR Haiti team had contacts in the country who felt that it was safe for us to go. We trusted them, had a wonderful time, and never once felt unsafe—except maybe in Port-au-Prince at rush

hour. For me, the most useful part of that State Department warning was the phrase: "Traffic is extremely chaotic."

But the State Department is not in the business of telling you why you *should* visit a country, so I'll give you a few reasons. Haiti is breathtakingly beautiful, with mountains and ocean around every turn. You have never eaten such good mangoes in your life. And the people we met were incredible.

St. Patrick's was full of bright students and gifted teachers. In the towns we visited, the streets were lined with artisans selling all kinds of beautiful handmade wares. It was hard to reconcile the considerable natural and human resources in Haiti with the staggering absence of resources of any other kind.

If you've been at church for the last two weeks, you've heard a bit about Haiti's lack of infrastructure. This makes it difficult for people to get jobs; it makes it even harder for people to start their own businesses. To transport a product for any distance, you need roads. To get a business loan, you need a functioning bank. In the United States, these are basics that we take for granted. In Haiti, they are largely an elusive dream.

The deck is stacked. Living in the urban U.S. comes with a certain set of privileges. Living in rural Haiti comes with a certain set of hardships. The actions of any one individual can't do much to change this.

¹ U.S. Department of State, [High-Risk Area Travelers](#).

And let us not forget: Haiti is not, by rights, a poor country. Instead, it is a nation whose history lands right at the brutal intersection of colonialism and slavery. Plenty of money has been made in and on Haiti—just not by Haitians.

God blessed Haiti with abundant resources. Human sin funneled them out.

I thought about this a lot this week, while reading over the parable of the dishonest manager. No one in my preaching group could find a satisfactory way to explain it. Most unsettling is Jesus' instruction to "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth."² With whom are we supposed to identify here? Not the rich man. Not the dishonest manager. Not the rich man's debtors, who themselves are probably rich traders. Some translations say not "one hundred jugs," but "nine hundred gallons" of olive oil—not an amount meant for personal use.³

Jesus' warning that "You cannot serve God and wealth"⁴ is damning, but at least it's clear. The stuff about being faithful with what belongs to another⁵—what are we supposed to do with that?

I've been thinking about that question. And I've been thinking about the history that makes St. Patrick's so different from SPR, and the accidents of fate that mean we are here, with the running water and the spare cash, and they are there, with neither.

Here's what I fear Jesus is getting at: It's all dishonest wealth. By Haitian standards, most of us are rich. And no matter how hard we have worked for our money, we in the U.S. are the inheritors of centuries of dishonesty that have made ours a rich nation and Haiti a poor one.

We are the ones who buy most of the cheap coffee and mangoes grown on foreign-owned plantations that continue to funnel money out of Haiti.

Whether we like it or not, we are custodians of the wealth that rightfully belongs to others. If we want to live into Jesus' radical vision of the Kingdom of God, the most important thing we can do with our money is be thoughtful in how we redistribute it.

And, for me, one of the truly exciting things about visiting St. Patrick's was seeing that our efforts at redistribution are having tangible, positive results. For this, much of the credit goes to the past and present leaders of the SPR Haiti team, who have been tireless in coming up with creative ways to build partnerships with the people of St. Patrick's and the town of Tom Gateau.

As you've heard over the last two weeks from members of this year's team, a little money can do a lot in Haiti. \$140 can provide healthy, freshly cooked lunches to a child at St. Patrick's for an entire year. Through partnering with us, the school has been able to pay its teachers and start a music program. Women in Tom Gateau have launched small businesses. The church walls, crumbled in an earthquake, have been rebuilt.

Our church and our nation are fortunate to be blessed with abundance. The point is not that we don't deserve it, but that *everyone* deserves it. Until everyone on earth has their most basic needs met, we are holding onto the wealth that belongs to another.

In her recent testimony, Haiti team member Joy Burrell Towns invited you to envision a prosperous, dynamic, and empowered Haiti. I will go one step further and invite you, today, to help build it.

² Luke 16:9.

³ Luke 16:6. NRSV: "A hundred jugs." NIV: "Nine hundred gallons." NLT: "Eight hundred gallons." KJV: "A hundred measures." The original Greek is, as you might guess, unclear.

⁴ Luke 16:13.

⁵ Luke 16:12.