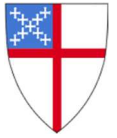




Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner
Sept. 28, 2025



[Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15](#)

[Psalms 91:1-6, 14-16](#)

[1 Timothy 6:6-19](#)

[Luke 16:19-31](#)

Welcome to Autumn, friends. Tomorrow is the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. This feast day, often called Michaelmas in England, marks a turn in the year toward a focus on connection between earthly and heavenly beings across all levels of creation, and on unity between the living and the dead. Over the next Sundays, we hear of all angels, and then all creatures as we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis, then Christ the healer and bringer of freedom to all people as we celebrate the Feast of St. Luke. We will hear of wrestling with angels, of God's spirit coming upon elders who will have visions and young people who will dream dreams, of all saints and all souls and the unity of the living and dead. We open our eyes to hints all around us of spiritual forces, as all moves toward final judgment and the ultimate reign of Christ over all creation.

This feast of St. Michael and All Angels reminds us vividly of the dimensions of creation beyond our senses and perceptions that are always active. Angels are "messengers" in service of God for the sake of God's creation. They serve as protectors and guardians, beacons and guides, speakers of God's invitations and revelations, strengtheners and comforters, and confronters of evil and warriors against evil forces. Michael the archangel battles with and defeats Satan. Jacob sees the movement of angels between earth and heaven, and later wrestles with God's messenger and demands a blessing. And the most essential message in this deep dreamlike vision of Jacob is not the angels, but God right beside Jacob, speaking the promise: "Know I am with you, I will not leave you."

So, let us pray for God's angels to come to our aid, to enlighten our paths, and to battle against forces of oppression, deception, and cruelty in the world. And above all, let us hear and remember God saying, "Know I am with you, I will not leave you."

So, dear friends, let's turn to our scriptures for this Sunday. As you might have seen in my meditation on Friday, there is a theme I think arises from all of these scriptures together – from Jeremiah and 1 Timothy and Luke. You've heard the old investment saying, "Buy low, sell high." I think this was even part of a song from the Saturday morning teaching cartoons, "Schoolhouse Rock" – "Buy low, sell high, get a piece of the pie."

It is so against our nature to follow this advice. We seem wired to follow impulses of fear, elation, and greed. When markets tumble and the economy is weak, we avoid making investments and are tempted by panicky fear to sell and get out before things get even worse. And when markets are riding high and the economy is strong, we are tempted to ride the tide of giddiness and buy while the getting is good and seems to promise continuing lift. But that is just how we get caught – when we follow our emotional impulses of fear, invincibility, and greed. Wise investing, whether of money or of effort and creative output, is a long game, despite the roller-coaster ride of the world around us and the tugs of our basic impulses.

Our scriptures this Sunday call us to a twist on this saying: “Buy low, share and give high.” When everything seems to be bottoming out, listen for when God prompts you to invest yourself and your gifts in something that may seem like a lost cause. But even more, when everything seems blessed and secure, when you have wealth and are far from anxiety about your daily bread, share that wealth generously and give it away with a spirit free from any bondage to it.

Jeremiah, the prophet whose sad appointed time was to try to call his people in dire days to see clearly their peril and ruin, to turn to God. Today, we hear of a bright moment of hope in Jeremiah’s actions – during the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, and the 18th year of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, while Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonian army and just shortly before Zedekiah was blinded and led away captive, at God’s prompting, Jeremiah buys a plot of land. When Jeremiah saw his nation being destroyed, collapsing from internal corruption and about to be overrun by an overpowering empire, he heard God prompting him to accept an offer to buy a plot of land – and then to hide and bury the deed to the property, in a known place, to await a time when his people would return to that land again and the deed could be rediscovered and reclaimed. He followed God’s call to invest in a promise and a quiet declaration of trust. It is, in the face of all that is turning bad in the world around, laying claim to a promise of return to what has been your good home, promise of return to what has been whole and good and stable in the past – so even in the midst of chaos and destruction and the seeming end of things, invest, make your purchase, dig down and lay your claim that can be passed down even past your own lifetime.

So – buy low. Invest of who you are and what you have to give, even when things seem grim. We do not need to be afraid of any terror by night, nor of arrows that fly by day; of any plague stalking in the dark, nor of any sickness laying waste in the bright of the sun (Ps. 91:5-6). Stay in the game.

But also, share and give high. Hold your wealth, your resources, all that you are and you have, loosely. Let go. Centuries later, Paul reminds Timothy to call wealthy followers of Jesus to be generous in sharing their wealth and investing their hearts in the greater treasures of the Kingdom of God. And he warns that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

And in the Gospel, the story Jesus tells about Lazarus and the rich man (in later Christian tradition given the name Dives) provides a stark reminder that selfish hoarding and self-serving indulgence, and neglect of the poor, comes with a terrible cost to souls in God’s economy.

The core message we hear very clearly today echoes what we heard from Jesus before, that where your treasure is, that’s where your heart will be as well. And you cannot serve God and mammon. You cannot serve God and wealth – full stop. Wealth spawns temptations of all sorts and distortions in how we see the world, ourselves, others, and all things. Wealth distorts our perceptions, our desires, our commitments, our compassion.

So – be generous in sharing. Buy low, share and give high.

How can each of us give from whatever our wealth is – in money, talent and skill, knowledge, property, influence, social and human capital (connectedness), energy? Where will you let your river flow, beyond yourself?

Let go, share what you have, know that this does not go with you and is at its best when it is shared and benefits others.

Those in need matter, do not ignore them while you indulge for yourself.

The great chasm, as Jesus describes it in his story between those nestled in the bosom of Abraham and those in fiery torment – this great chasm is in Dives' own mind and heart, as even in death he continues to view Lazarus as beneath him and the class of a servant or slave at best.

The great chasm... how does it get there? In each heart and mind, bit by bit. Choice by choice. Moment after moment. It grows from choices of our own making.

CS Lewis described his idea of the great chasm between hell and heaven in his short book, *The Great Divorce*. In this book, a bus ride is offered from hell to heaven, a way that Lewis used to convey his belief in the ongoing merciful outreach of God to those who were apart from God and from true and full life. The bus starts with trying to draw people in hell to take the journey. Hell in Lewis' vision is a gray-lit, dull, flat place, with people moving further and further away from each other in order to be isolated, kind of like urban and suburban sprawl. But, as it turns out, hell is actually a miniscule space, microscopic as people there have shrunk in their being. And it is less than solid, so when they take the bus trip to heaven and step out onto the ground of heaven, the grass which is so very completely real cuts through their feet. Each visitor faces a choice to leave behind attachments and perceptions of themselves and the world, and to embrace a journey to new and full being. They have a choice to leave their self-made and self-maintained hells. Only a few choose the path that brings true life and healing. Others return to hell where it is more familiar and comfortable. But the opportunity is offered, just as it is in this life. For Lewis, the great chasm is very much self-imposed and self-maintained.

The patterned choices and decisions of Dives, the rich man, are continuing in his hell. He still has not converted, he still is treating Lazarus as less than himself and at best only a servant rather than a homeless and helpless waif that is a drain on society.

Choosing to ignore God's call exacts a price in our lives.

In death, Dives is still not asking for forgiveness, acknowledging his wrongdoing – not speaking to Lazarus directly and asking for forgiveness.

Wealth corrupts. Certainly, other things can corrupt and distort, too. We have all heard warnings about the distortions that can come with pursuit of money, sex, and power. There are other corrupting forces as well. But money holds unique sway. Think of some of the sayings we all know. "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." Ah, you have no boots and so you have no bootstraps? You are asking for help? Well I can give you some help, but "not as a handout, but as a hand-up." These are sayings that give us an escape clothed in the language of supposed virtue from the kind of generosity and freedom from attachment that Jesus teaches and shows. These are sayings that give license to us stepping away from direct help, or even from direct contact.

This is just one example of how wealth distorts our perceptions, our desires, our compassion – and this distortion happens not just on an individual level but to communities, whole nations.

In our sabbatical travels, and back here at home, Heather and I have seen the tragic consequences of the intentional dry-up and closure of USAID, around the world. There are tsunami-like ripple-effects of this choice of our federal government in places abroad, and here.

The High Atlas Foundation in Morocco has been doing amazing work in environmentally sound agricultural development and economic strengthening of villages, using historic sacred places of interfaith connection that were falling into disrepair to build stations of learning and action. Hundreds of thousands of fruit- and nut-bearing trees have been raised and distributed across villages, women have been trained to help lead these efforts and create cottage industries, and young people are coming together across religious and cultural traditions in Morocco to learn together. USAID helped support this work launched over 30 years ago by a Jewish American Peace Corps volunteer, Yossef Ben-Meir, along with funds from the king of Morocco. They now face a serious shortfall.

The Foundation of Memories for the Future is doing parallel work with diverse youth and young adults across Morocco, bringing them together to work at restoring historic sacred places of important interfaith connection, and learning together about the different Abrahamic religions and cultures and how they helped each other at important points in Moroccan history. In this shared restoration work, in conversation with each other and with religious leaders, and in helping to plan and shape the rebirth of these places as spaces of respectful mutual learning and care, these young people are developing important habits of perception, interaction, and engagement with others that serves as a strong “vaccination” against radicalizing forces. Lamia Radi, a Muslim women who leads these efforts, is a force of nature, strong in character. The Foundation received USAID support as it embarked on projects like the reclaiming and rebuilding of the Catholic Monastery of Toulmiline, which I have spoken about before.

There is also the English Language Learning Center in the city of Fez in Morocco, led by Americans, as a place of intercultural exchange between English-speaking, Arabic-speaking, and Berber-speaking students. Their work together included not only learning each other’s languages but also working together on shared efforts in social care. The relationships formed have helped to anchor and strengthen respect across cultures. USAID was a significant supporter of this program.

And there are, similarly, the Interreligious Institute in Albania, and the College of St. Cyril and St. Methodius in North Macedonia, each supporting the strengthening of bonds and shared work for the common good across faith traditions, each supported in part with funding from USAID.

Closer to home but also with impact internationally is the loss of USAID funding to Episcopal Migration Ministries. You have heard me before describe the effect on refugee and immigrant programs by World Relief and Thrive Internation in Spokane. The closure of USAID also directly affects programs like the refugee ministry in Rome at the Episcopal Church of St. Paul's within the Walls, where our own Madeline Hennig served and helped to strengthen the program.

Don't think that I am not deeply angered by our nation's stepping away from this important work across the world, this shuttering of our own generosity as a nation with wealth for sharing with others. We have intentionally forsaken and refused to continue our practice of giving.

Giving matters. It matters to those to whom and for whom we give. And it matters to our own souls.

Giving to the church is important as a place to start learning the practice of giving and making it a steady habit.

We read in scripture of the practice of tithing, the giving of our first fruits for God's use. Some of us take this "first fruits" idea seriously and schedule automatic payments from our monthly income to the church and other organizations we consider important to support for the common good. This way, giving is not an afterthought, but is the first thought in our household economies. This simple practice helps reorient our thoughts, our perceptions, our desires, our commitments, and our compassion. This is one way of putting into practice what Paul counseled Timothy to encourage people with some abundance of wealth to do – to be rich in doing good, to let go their grip on wealth, to share their wealth generously and use it to do good.

What will you do to secure the world and make it a better place – not by hoarding or carving out your own little domain and redout and compound for survival and gated community – but by sharing widely and distributing with intention for growing security for as many as you can?

In this nation, we are facing a huge upcoming transfer of wealth, the largest in our history. Where will your treasure go?

Whatever your wealth – in money, land, property, knowledge, skill, "street smarts" and social know-how, influence, time, energy – how will you share it, let it go, and make a difference with it?

Friends, let us faithfully give ourselves to the long game. Let us buy low and invest what we can even in dire times, even in what seem to be lost causes. And, from our abundance, let us share and give high, with high-spirited joy and gratitude. This is the very way of God who has given and continues to give all for us. May our rivers flow.