

## Stuck in Between

Sermon 145 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 3, 2022

Luke 16:10-13

My little neighbor, Rae, really wants a dog for her birthday. She is turning 6 and she really believes the time is now for her to get a dog. She's asked her parents and they have responded the way so many of us do when children come asking for a new pet.

"Rae, you already have a hamster."

"I know, but I want a puppy too!"

"Rae, I can't take care of another living thing."

"I'll do it mommy, I'll take care of it, I want it that bad."

"Rae, you don't even take care of the hamster."

"I will, I will, I promise!"

You know how these things go.

Well, my little neighbor, Rae, was persistent enough that about a month ago they agreed that if she took care of Fluffball (that's the hamster's name)... If she took care of Fluffball all by herself, feeding him every night, making sure the water was refilled and the cage was clean; if she could do all this, then they'd think about letting her get a puppy for her birthday.

I was over there with them two nights ago and I asked how things were going with Fluffball. Rae let me know that everything is still on track, as she got up from the sofa where she was sitting and went in to begin her nightly routine of taking organic broccoli and carrots from the fridge, breaking them into small pieces, and then giving them to the hamster. 7:00 pm is dinner time and Fluffball must be fed, watered and the cage cleaned.

Rae is a girl who knows what she wants. She is on a mission. She is focused. And she is going to do everything she can to make it happen.

I can remember times in my own childhood when I worked for things like this. Times when I knew what I wanted and I would just go after it – organizing everything else in my life around that goal to make sure it would be accomplished. Have you ever wanted something badly enough to do that? Badly enough to structure your life around it?

If Rae's life were a song, each day a different verse, this nightly resolve to feed and care for Fluffball all by herself – that would be the refrain. The refrain, of course, being the line or melody that is repeated throughout, often stuck in between the verses, reminding the musician and the listener of the underlying or overarching theme that connects each verse to the next and gives away what the song is actually and ultimately about.

If Rae's life were a song, this routine would be her refrain, telling the world her heart's greatest desire: Rae wants a dog.

*What do you want?*

If you aren't quite sure how to answer that question, maybe it would help to take a look at your own routines, rhythms... your refrains. What are the important things to which you devote your time, energy, and resources? What gets priority on your calendar? What do you spend your days thinking and dreaming about? What snatches up the first chunk of your budget?

If our lives were a song, perhaps these would be the refrains that tell of our hearts' greatest desires?

*So what do you want?*

Scholars have long agreed that the main plot of Luke's Gospel is Jesus' journey through Galilee. And on that journey, Jesus shows us what he wants... what God wants.

Similar to other epic tales, Luke tells the story of Jesus' journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem. Every event – even the smallest interactions on the road-marking an important lesson, an opportunity for growth and an expanded understanding of God's love.

If Luke's Gospel were a song, perhaps it would be a ballad like Alan Jackson's *Remember When* which of course tells the story of life, from cradle to grave. The verses tell the stories of significant moments, beautiful moments that shape the journey of life. And they are held together by the 2-word refrain: Remember when. These two words offer more than just repetition. They tell us in lyrical form that life happens quickly, time flies by, and we should cherish every moment before it is gone.

*Remember when...* reminds us to pause and give thanks.

*Remember when...* tells us what is most important.

*Remember when...* anchors the song and it also asks the question... Will you remember?

Have you been present enough when the important moments happen? Did you or DO you appreciate them for the right reasons? Was your heart in the right place or were you caught up with things of lesser import? "Remember when" is both a call and a question... *Will you remember?*

When we read the Gospel in small chunks, one story, one verse at a time, there is much to be gained for sure, but sometimes we can miss this bigger picture, the ways that Jesus grows and learns, the emergence of the mission and the beauty of the song as a whole. We miss the lessons tucked away in the sequence, the structure, and the melody and if we are not careful, we can even miss the refrain!

Yes... If Luke's Gospel were a ballad about Jesus' life from cradle to grave, the central theme, the main point, the purpose of Jesus' mission and message could be summarized like this: If you want to know about the Kingdom of God, and if you have any money, power, privilege, or possessions... you have to give them away.

Their perspective, of course, is apparent throughout the text. From beginning to end Luke's song is a ballad of abundant and at times even absurd generosity toward the poor and marginalized. From the Magnificat which insists that power brokers be made low to Jesus's sermon on the plain which says "blessed are you who are poor and woe to you who are rich... blessed are you who are hungry now and woe to you who are well fed..." From the reading of the Isaiah scroll proclaiming release and liberation to the very text we read today... Jesus's message – according to Luke - is all about the social, the economic, and dare I say even the political.

Each verse sheds light on a different expression of the meaning, but the little refrain that is stuck right in between these stories helps us remember the main theme:

You can't serve two masters.

And of course, the question is implied... Who [or what] will you serve?

The funny thing about refrains is that they are often the only part we remember. This is quite obvious if you've ever been to a Karaoke bar and suffered through someone's slurry recollection of the verses only to belt out with utmost confidence the words of the refrain.

If that's not your scene, maybe you can recall the words from the Temptations' *My Girl*, Abba's *Dancing Queen*, or Carly Rae Jepsen's *Call Me Maybe*. But can you sing the verses by heart? Maybe Jesus knew that we would never be able to remember every word to every verse, so he gave us a refrain, stuck right there in between, to sum it up and tie it all together. Or maybe it was important to Luke, that these stories flow like verses of a song, connected and strung together by a memorable refrain... One that tells us what the answer is and at the same time asks the question:

*No one can serve two masters.  
Whoever is faithful in little is faithful in much.  
No one can serve both God and money.*

*Which one will you serve?*

One of my favorite things about this refrain, stuck in between these two parables, is that it feels very dualistic. It is one of those rare *either/or* situations whereas I find that Jesus tends to be a *both/and* kind of guy. So when Jesus says it's got to be one or the other, you can't have it both ways, he's got my attention.

Going back to read the first parable more closely, the one about the rich man and his crafty money manager does not really clarify things. After all, the manager is rewarded for his dishonesty. He bends the rules and adjusts the ledger in order to forgive debts and make friends with the poor who are indebted to his master.

And looking again at the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, I'm still not gaining clarity because there, I'm not even sure that the rich man knew Lazarus was outside the gate until it was too late. Isn't it possible that his wealth protected him, blinded him, built a wall between him and the poor who sat just on the other side? Couldn't it be that he just didn't know?

Which master did they serve? Was it God? Was it self? Was it money? Or was it something else altogether? What did they really want? What refrain did they sing with their life song? And how can theirs possibly help us know what we should do with ours?

Unless... maybe this Lukan refrain is both a call and a question... and maybe it is also an invitation... An invitation to remember and to learn, to change and to become the kind of person that God is calling us to become?

In his book, *You Are What You Love*, James K.A. Smith writes that human beings are creatures who are driven by our loves – and there are many loves – both sacred and secular. These loves motivate us, they anchor us, and... they shape us into the person we are becoming. Many Christians like to think that our love of God is primary, but when we look at our lives, the refrains that we repeat over and over again often tell a different story.

There is the love of money that calls us to live our lives in pursuit of all kinds of material gain and financial security. There is the love of power that feeds our ambition and helps us feel untouchable. There is the love of prestige that assures us that we will be valued and admired. There is the love of privilege that allows for comfort and stability. (This is an incomplete list by the way... What do YOU love?)

Because our whole world is set up to empower and reward these things, and because whether we like it or not we live in this world, we participate in routines and rhythms that reinforce their importance. In other words, we hear – and are invited to sing – these secular refrains every day.

Refrains that tell us we are only as good as our professional success. That we are only worth the numerical value that appears on our paychecks or in our bank account. Refrains that call us to serve only ourselves. Refrains that push us to protect only our own personal freedoms. And refrains that encourage us to store up resources for ourselves, lest we be caught unprepared if the whole world were to descend into chaos. These are the melodies, the lyrics, and the songs the world is singing around us; and these are the refrains that shape our minds, our hearts, and even our souls for the journey.

But is this really what we want? Is this really what we love?

Or is there another song, another love, another refrain that we can hear and sing along... a refrain that will teach us and expand us, and grow our hearts in the love of God and love of neighbor? According to Luke, and according to Jesus, there is and it goes like this:

*Whoever is faithful with little is faithful with much.*

*Whoever is honest with little is honest with much.*

*No one can serve two masters.*

*You cannot serve both God and wealth.*

I am excited for my little neighbor, Rae's, birthday next month. I am excited because I really think she's going to get her puppy. She knows what she wants, and she's singing her refrain every night as she gets the broccoli to feed Fluffball, the hamster. Each night as she sings this refrain with her life, she grows up a little more. She becomes more responsible and attuned to what it means to take care of another living creature. Through her nightly ritual, she is becoming the caregiver she wants to be for the dog that isn't yet hers, but that she loves nonetheless.

Who do we love? When we love something or someone, even someone we do not yet fully know, we are changed by it and we become responsible for it. This is what Rae is experiencing as she tunes her life and her love toward the thing she ultimately wants. Her life is already being woven together with another living being as she practices her care for it, as she discovers how to take responsibility for it, how to orient her whole life in service of it.

We, too, know something of this love because we have experienced it and have been shaped by it in our closest relationships. In friendship and marriage, in partnership and parenting, in caregiving, and in service of others we have loved and been loved. Each expression and experience of course bearing witness to the greatest love – which is the love that God has for all of God's creation. Creation is God's song and Love is God's refrain. This refrain of love is both a calling and a question, and most importantly it is an invitation.

So what do we love? Is it God or is it something else? If it is indeed God whom we love, then that love will change us and its song will become our refrain. Love will be the thing that holds all the verses of our lives together because when we love God, we are changed and our hearts can't help but sing of generosity and selflessness. Our daily rituals, routines, and refrains become acts of giving away rather than storing up. This is the very definition of discipleship, to participate in the work of Christ, following Jesus from Nazareth to Jerusalem, from cradle to grave as Love calls us to responsibility for and relationship with one another.

And once we discover THAT the choice between God and wealth, God and power, God and privilege, God and possessions...God and any other master this world tempts us to serve... well, the choice becomes as simple as the refrain. No woman or man can serve two masters. So what do we want? Whom will we serve? What, or rather whom will we love?