

September 22, 2019 Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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GOSPEL

Luke 16:1-13

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the sixteenth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

¹Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ²So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ ³Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ ⁸And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹And 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.

¹⁰“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Rev. Dr. Mitzi Smith begins her commentary on Luke 16 by describing this passage as “a parable peculiar to Luke’s gospel.” While the meaning I think she intended for us to understand is that this parable only appears in Luke and no other gospel account...I also think the word “peculiar” was not an accident.

This *is* a peculiar parable. We won’t decipher it all in these few minutes...but perhaps we can find a good place to begin...

Perhaps, we can retrace our steps first...We’ve heard Jesus say that there is a man who was a manager for a rich man. We can assume he was enslaved or of very low status...because when he is accused of squandering his master’s wealth (we don’t even know by whom he is accused)...he is not given a chance to defend himself. He is essentially asked to go to his desk to get his computer and badge so he can turn them in and leave the building. He is not trusted. His story doesn’t matter to those who are powerful.

But then, he takes the precious few moments of standing he has left to make some calls. He finds the folks who owe his master money and slashes their debts down while he still has the books in hand. Given the accusation against him...it is impossible for us to know if he was returning the debts to a fair price...because he had inflated them for his own gain...or maybe he is just trying to endear himself to people whose help he is about to desperately need.

In any case, the master finds out quickly enough. It probably wasn’t a very well thought-out plan. I mean...did he really think no one would notice? But when his master does discover the deception...he seems to wink and say with surprise...“well done, you sneaky so-and-so... You sure know how to use the power you have to get ahead however you can.” Maybe the con recognized a con. Maybe he admired the guts it took to try to pull one last one over.

But Jesus seems to join the master in commending the shrewd slave. Saying that we should be willing to use wealth as a tool to gain the things that really matter. Peculiar, indeed.

The final lines probably make the most sense of all of it: no one can serve two masters. No one can serve both God and wealth. Perhaps the lesson of this parable is simple enough: *Use* wealth. Don't *serve* it. Whatever we *serve* will control us...If we are going to live into God's intentions for us, then we need to be aware of the difference between what we are *using* and what we are *servicing*.

And for Luke...wealth is the most dangerous idol. It is the power in this world most ready to pull us away from God. And so God's work is about turning things upside down...so that wealth and the people who have it aren't highest and best anymore.

Luke is pointing to God's radical remaking of the universe...where we are shaped by love and woven into relationship. Greed and wealth isolate us...They are lonely gods. But ours is a God of relationship...so much so that even someone who is putting relationships over money for what seem to be completely self-interested reasons is better than the one who serves wealth for its own sake.

It's still hard to understand, though. Perhaps a modern-day parable might help...a true story, in fact...It goes like this:

There was a rich sports network who went from city to city to gain favor with the powerless little people who sat and watched its programming week after week, and when they travelled throughout the land they put up their Game Day stage...so the little people could feel important and maybe even be on television and feel like they were really a part of it all. In one city in Iowa, there was a fan who made his way to front of the crowd to hold up a sign that was broadcast to millions of other fans...And it said, in sloppy permanent marker: "Bud Light Supply Needs Replenishing" and then listed his VenMo ID so people could send him money. And, the other unimportant people who lived under the power of the wealthy network saw it...and low and behold...the fan was sent over \$200,000 from across the country. When he saw what had happened, he decided that it wasn't really about the money...and he committed to donating it to the children's hospital. And soon, VenMo and Anheuser Busch saw what he had done...and commended the clever fan...because he had taken the power of

their program and used it as a platform for his own purposes. And so as to not look less generous or powerful than a simple fan...they pledged to match his donation...so now the Stead Family Children's Hospital will receive over \$800,000...because Carson acted so shrewdly.

This story isn't exactly the same...of course...but it feels similar. It is a tale of someone with very little power using what power they had to advance their own interests...despite how transparent their selfishness was. With Carson's story, of course, we get to hear what happens next. We don't know what the shrewd manager in Luke's parable did next...but we do know that Carson saw what had happened...and realized he had the chance to prioritize relationships instead of money...Instead of taking what was given to him, he used it to connect all these humans who share a common a weekly ritual of paying homage to an oblong ball and the people who throw it and catch it and run with it (and... do irreversible damage to each other's brains in the process...but that's another story). He took that connection and made it deeper...more profound...more about humanity than money.

Perhaps that is what Jesus saw as possible in the actions of the shrewd manager.

You see...Jesus knows that most of us aren't as powerful as the most wealthy people in our communities...or as ESPN...or anything like that. But Jesus knows that if we all leverage what power we do have to serve our relationships to one another...to serve God...and not wealth...then amazing things are possible: things as amazing as a disgraced and dismissed slave being commended for a clever con...things as amazing as beer money being turned into a force of hope and life for sick children.

When we live as if we are all connected (even when we are still too stuck in our selfishness to know that it's true)...we are getting closer to the kingdom than when we are all alone and serving the wealth we imagine will protect us. Perhaps the rich man was shocked out of his complacency by the brazen actions of this servant.

Perhaps we all have more power than we realize to wake each other up to what really matters...because we have a God who shocks us awake with their very presence...in Word and Bread and Wine and Water...God breaks in...into business as usual...up to the edge of the crowd at Game Day...into the worry and work of making a paycheck...God comes close...and says...

“Here I am. I will do anything to undo what is breaking you...what is laying claim on your life. I will let myself be broken open, poured out, emptied again into the world...

I love you.

In fact, I will enter this world as someone with no standing...who will be accused of mismanaging what I have been given...who won't be heard if I try to defend myself. I will be no rich man. I will be as poor and powerless as you have ever felt.

And then, I will cheat every system that tries to keep an account of your debts. I will rewrite the books. And the powers of this world won't even know what do. They won't be able to stop me. I will be so brazen that you will snap out of the nightmare that says you aren't enough, can't do enough, can't be enough...because...I made you. And I made you more than enough. You don't have to serve anyone or anything that says otherwise.

So...now you know...go on...spread the word. Change the world.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.