

Pentecost 15C (9/22/2019)

Amos 8:4-7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

**Luke 16:1-13**

*If God were to demand an honest account of the world's economic logic, could we justify it? For those whose survival is on the line, there is little motivation to act justly in unjust circumstances. And, the scheming of any individual actor is no sin that we can lay at his feet alone. It indicts us all so long as we prioritize accumulation for the few at the expense of justice for the many.*

I have only one question for Jesus: What?

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager has consistently mystified interpreters, and frankly, many would rather avoid it altogether. Those who choose to tackle the parable head-on tend to emerge from the fray with diverse interpretations. What are we to do with this odd story and the disjointed series of maxims that follow it? "His master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly...And 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...If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?...You cannot serve God and wealth."

For those of us who'd prefer that Jesus' teachings be neat and tidy, this passage is a thorn in our side. Wouldn't it be easier if every parable had a simple takeaway? *A neighbor is one who shows mercy.<sup>1</sup> All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.<sup>2</sup> God waits patiently for the return of wayward children and welcomes them home with open arms.<sup>3</sup>* Those are clear-cut lessons.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:7-11.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 15:11-32.

But, for as straightforward as the messages of other parables may be, they're no less challenging than the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. And, therein lies the power of parable as a mode of teaching. **A parable is the people's story,<sup>4</sup> consisting of images and themes plucked from ordinary life. Nevertheless, these grassroots tales provoke our theological and moral imagination by pointing to fresh and often difficult insights into the life of faith:** neighborliness extends to those we're least inclined to view as neighbors; self-advancement is at odds with faithfulness and love; God does not insist on punishing wrongdoing, but urges us to celebrate with those who were lost, yet have been found. And, in the case of today's Gospel from Luke, a conniving employee apparently has something to tell us about our responsibilities to each other and to God.

While we can't expect the Parable of the Dishonest Manager to provide easy answers, we can expect it to function as all parables do, that is, to capture our attention and challenge our expectations. So, **what does Jesus' story have to say to us? Why does he use such a perplexing example to teach us about faithfulness?**

As a way of beginning to answer these questions, consider the parable's original context. The manager is not an employee in the modern sense, but more likely a chief slave<sup>5</sup> in the household of the rich man, trained to handle his affairs in his absence. The rich man's debtors are apparently tenants on his land who are obligated to pay him a fixed return in the form of agricultural goods, in this case exorbitant quantities of olive oil and wheat.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Helen Montgomery Debevoise, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 92.

<sup>5</sup> See R. Alan Culpepper, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 310.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 307.

This arrangement reflects an ancient Near Eastern economic structure in which the vast majority of people are always at the mercy of a tiny wealthy elite.<sup>7</sup> And, the poor are basically powerless. Notice that the rich man relieves the manager of his position on the basis of hearsay. There is neither evidence of his mismanagement nor any recourse, but only a summary dismissal. Notice also that the rich man doesn't seem to mind that his slave's subsequent maneuvering costs him fifty jugs of oil and twenty containers of wheat. Instead, he's entertained by the slave's cleverness, and applauds him for it. Finally, notice that the slave has no legitimate alternatives to his former position. "I am not strong enough to dig," he laments, "and I am ashamed to beg." Without access to other means of survival, he is truly desperate.

**Imagine that your master possesses so much wealth that he doesn't even miss what amounts to a fortune in the eyes of the average person. And, as a victim of abrupt termination, imagine that your only options are hard labor, destitution, or fraud. Which would you choose?**

We may be troubled by the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, and particularly by the fact that Jesus does not readily condemn the main character's actions. But given the context, **perhaps Jesus' purpose in telling this story is partly to unmask the ways of the world and indicate the lengths to which people will go to survive.** "There is no way to be honest," writes one interpreter, "in a system that is already excessively unjust and dishonest."<sup>8</sup>

Can we apply the moral ambiguity of Jesus' parable to the modern context? God has blessed the world with abundance such that no one needs to go without basic

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<sup>7</sup> See G. Penny Nixon, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 93.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 95.

necessities. Yet, in every community the world around, economically vulnerable people are faced with limited options for survival. Without access to gainful work, some turn to the underground economy or other criminal activity, often profiting larger enterprises while being subjected to the most risk and the steepest penalties. It's a basic lack of opportunity, and not a moral deficiency, that drives this dynamic.<sup>9</sup>

**Perhaps we ought to focus our moral outrage less on the choices of desperate people than on the inequities that force those choices upon them.**

**Perhaps the prevailing system is more deserving of reproach:** “Hear this, you that trample on the needy,” the Prophet Amos proclaims in our first reading, “and bring to ruin the poor of the land... The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.”

Dear church, **if God were to demand an honest account of the world's economic logic, could we justify it?** For those whose survival is on the line, there is little motivation to act justly in unjust circumstances. And, the scheming of any individual actor is no sin that we can lay at his feet alone. It indicts us all so long as we prioritize accumulation for the few at the expense of justice for the many.

**Our hope lies in God's overflowing generosity, the wellspring of all good things. By serving the Giver, and not the gift itself, we can recognize the gift for what it is, and recommit ourselves to its wise use for the sake of the world God so loves.**

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Eric C. Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*, 249-55.