

Pentecost 18C (9/18/2016)

Amos 8:4-7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

Which god do we serve? And, what is that god's vision for human life? The god of wealth dictates that we deal strategically with one another, so that some of us benefit from the ways of the world while others fall behind. The God of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, entrusts us to each other's care by the example of his sacrificial love, always providing enough for our life together.

Would it surprise you to know that there are weeks when preachers around the world sit down at their desks, read a biblical text assigned for the following Sunday, pause for a moment, and think, "Huh?" If you cling to the notion that your preacher possesses a gift for reading any biblical text with profound understanding and perfect confidence, let me disabuse you of that notion today. That's not to say we don't do our best to read every text as faithfully as we can (not to mention pray fervently for the Spirit's guidance), but there are certain passages that present such an interpretive challenge that we're simply not sure what to preach.

I'm afraid today's Gospel from Luke is one of those passages. So, if you're confused, you're not alone. "And 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." In fact, these teachings of Jesus, strung together with tenuous connections, have inspired

widely varying interpretations, which means that the so-called experts are by no means clear on the subject either.¹

What are we supposed to do in cases like this? Even when the Bible is hard to understand or accept, how do we honor the wisdom that God is speaking into our lives, wisdom that leads us into a more abundant life together? Today, we might begin by considering the role of parables in Jesus' teaching. One interpreter calls parable "the people's story,"² an insight into truth that is grounded in simple narrative. **Parables are powerful because they provoke our imaginations and settle in our hearts.** Even when a parable's message cannot be tied up neatly with a bow, the story nevertheless brings a truth to life and insists that we struggle with it.

With regard to the parable in today's Gospel, the struggle is to know exactly how Jesus expects us to view the character at the center of the story. The dishonest manager is complex, and his actions are ethically dubious. From one perspective, he mismanages his employer's resources, steals from him in order to win favor with others, and suffers no consequence for it. From another perspective, he is caught in a predicament with no easy outcome, takes the only option he sees available to him, and in the process reduces the crushing debts of the rich man's clients.

We might be inclined at first to view the dishonest manager as a sort of Robin Hood figure, a hero coming to the aid of the debtors by fleecing the rich man. After all, the system is rigged to profit the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable, and we know that **Holy Scripture has a harsh word for those who take advantage of others for their own benefit.** See our first reading from the Prophet Amos.

¹ See David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-18-c-wealth-and-relationships/>.

² Helen Montgomery Debevoise, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 92.

But, the dishonest manager's motives are not as pure as Robin Hood's, are they? In the end, he does not reduce debts for the sake of justice, but for the sake of gain. Rather than releasing the rich man's clients from their debt, he simply transfers it to himself by putting them in a position to return the favor.³ And surprisingly, the manager's employer does not punish him for his dishonesty, but commends him for his craftiness! "And I tell you," Jesus concludes, "make friends for *yourselves* by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

The parable is certainly memorable, but what are we to make of it? At first, it may sound like Jesus sets up the dishonest manager as an example to be emulated, but I think the key to Jesus' perspective lies in this statement: "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." The dishonest manager, in other words, plays skillfully by the rules of the world in which he lives. And **in Luke, the rules of wealth – the rules of acquisition – are competition, exploitation, and disregard for those on the margins.**⁴ Moneyed lenders charge interest at exorbitant rates, managers navigate the system by committing fraud, and the poor are relegated to hard labor or begging. Thus, Jesus insists that wealth itself is "dishonest," just as the manager is dishonest.⁵ "Business as usual" is broken.

What's more, this system is so prevalent, so powerful that Jesus likens it to an object of worship. Wealth functions like a god, "the most common idol on earth," as

³ See Scott Bader-Saye, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 94.

⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 596-7.

⁵ *Ibid.* 593.

Martin Luther wrote.⁶ And so, Jesus presents us with a dilemma: “No slave can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Suddenly, we are compelled to consider our own place in the story. Which god do we truly serve? And, what is that god’s vision for human life? **The god of wealth dictates that we deal strategically with one another, so that some of us benefit from the ways of the world while others fall behind.** As long as we pursue our own interests at all costs – even if we have to undermine each other, even if some of us suffer as a result – we are slaves to the god of wealth.

But the God of Jesus Christ dictates another way of life. *That* God, the God who gathers us today around signs of grace, overturns business as usual. **That God condemns the way of competition and exploitation, entrusting us to each other’s care by the example of Jesus’ sacrificial love.** *That* God gives us people to love and things to use, not things to love and people to use.⁷

Dear church, discipleship is not a strategy for personal advancement. Rather, the way of life that Jesus sets before us anticipates a world where there is enough to go around for everyone, where we don’t need to be afraid of what we might lose. **Living with an eye to our eternal relationship with God, we are no longer preoccupied with securing our piece of the pie, but we can set our sights instead on the richness of a life lived for each other.**

⁶ *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, 387.

⁷ Attributed to Saint Augustine. See Lose.