

15th Sunday after Pentecost- Proper 20 (C)

Luke 16: 1-13

Sept 18, 2022

Christ Episcopal Church

Towanda, Pa.

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Sometimes, as in last week, our readings offer an integration of the messages that Jesus tries to convey to us. Like many readings this summer, this parable of Luke seems to offer contraction to our sense of right or wrong. Specifically , Jesus is commending the actions of a dishonest manager. It smacks of ludicrous sensibilities to say the least. Many a preacher has been confounded in extracting a message. I would posit that even Luke, as he wrote this was perplexed himself. Let's journey together to untangle the thread of this reading.

There are similarities to the story of the Prodigal Son, the lost sheep, the lost coin ; the parables which precedes this text. However what is curious here is that the steward of dishonesty ***is not penitent***. So why would any character in this story be commended no less? Supposedly, the return on savings of the debtors are to be passed to this manager in the form of a gift. So it is confusing to us when the master praises him for his craftiness. What is more unsettling is when Jesus praises the steward and

commends our imitation. Did we hear this right? How do we untangle this confusing message? ¹

Let us gain some perspective on context here: In our secular world, most of us assign other people's worth by what they own . We hold up celebrities and billionaires as top players in our money driven society. Others identify their most precious people according to what they can do for them.

The Pharisees improperly valued money over people.. We have to understand the Palestinian economics of the first century. The Roman occupation ruled Israel. Rulers exploited natural resources and the labor of people via excessive taxation. The rich people lived in the south Judaea and the small farmers lived in the north in Galilee. The farmers who were poor, needed wheat, oil , and wine to live but often traded those crops for money they needed just to live.

Romans would tax the small farmers and the rich would exploit them by saying that they would pay their taxes in return for their land. The rich got richer while poor got poorer. This system exploited the poor and incensed Jesus in the temple causing him to chase the tax collectors out.

Remember when he said, “Stop making the temple a den of robbers?”

When rulers wanted their due, they would send mid level managers to get their money. The farmers were not being squeezed hard enough per the rich who were exploiting them. The rich people thought farmers were lazy. They wanted increasing return on investment. The manager as middle class between rich and poor would typically profit also.

This manager however, arranged things with the poor to switch things up. In this scenario, the mid manager **eased the indebtedness** of the poor... in his crafty accounting ; so this parable then is not about somebody evil and terrible but someone who saw the injustice of the system .²

We could entitle this, “ the parable of the steward who switched sides!”

Amos the prophet is literally calling this out this bad behavior specifically! Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land saying: “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? The exploitation is named and pointed to.

² <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper20c>

Jesus is saying that money is not the measure of all things, Our use of money should be in service of relationships, not relationships to service money.

Jesus goes on to say, you cannot serve two masters. You will either hate God and love money or hate money and love God. We can be made dirty by how we use money.³

We have a have an economic ordering of things which dictates monetary transactions in society. This can't be discarded nor our sensibilities about it.

As an example: Take our culture that sees oceans, forests, soil, mountains and do not think of their inherent value but about, how can that serve us in short term profit for those at the top of our economy. We divert waterways for sport, mountains to sculpt ski areas drawing in crowds for money. Money has brainwashed us, Money has blinded us. Younger generations are calling us out on land stewardship.

Jesus has an economic system ...where everyone matters. Love God and everything else will have a new value. You will realize that we are expendable as a cog in the economic wheel.

Put money in its proper place seems to be the directive.

³ *Ibid*

I saw an example of this during the past week which helped to clarify the message I think Jesus is trying to convey. . My son John and I had an immersion experience in the CA wildfires while attending a family wedding. Part of the family experience together was to see the beautiful vistas of Lake Tahoe. For months and weeks this part of CA was unscathed by smoke. Not on our visit! We were relegated inside our lodgings for hours in the few days there to avoid breathing dangers.

On the trip back, the smoke layer over the area was visible as an overarching smoke layer visible with the earth curvature. It was devastating in sight, in smell, in anticipation of its environmental insult. These occurrences are the new seasonal normal of my west coast family. For us, it created environmental anxiety. Before this experience, our sense of this was a subjective one. To experience global realities first hand is alarming.

My heart was gladdened to hear that the founder of the company “Patagonia” and his family are pledging a business solution in his 3 billion dollar company to fight our climate crisis. Like the steward who changed his mind and eased the poverty of the farmers in Galilee, this reluctant billionaire is seeking solutions by funding a” trust of purpose”. He

recognizes the earth as our sole shareholder, not the persons seeking profit. He is challenging others in the world to rearrange priorities for relationships over profits, people over monetary gain, climate health over exploitation.

Chouinard and his family will transfer their entire ownership stake into two newly created entities. Those entities will ensure that the company's values will continue to be upheld — and that Patagonia's profits are used to combat climate change.

"If we have any hope of a thriving planet 50 years from now, it demands all of us doing all we can with the resources we have," Chouinard said in a statement Wednesday. "Instead of extracting value from nature and transforming it into wealth, we are using the wealth Patagonia creates to protect the source."⁴

I commend problem solvers and look to myself as to how I play a part, however small my contribution may be. I've taken on the goal of exploring creation care in my small little corner of existence. We can learn as Episcopalians with others how our decisions as individuals and members of society directly influence God's creations.

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/14/business/patagonia-ownership/index.html>

I invite you to join me if you will to reflect and consider. As such, you'll need to do some reflection and personal decision-making about how God is calling you to be more loving, more liberating and more life-giving in your relationship to the whole of creation. ⁵

*Prayer: Dear God, help us to realize that so much of what we value is fleeting so that we may share what we have generously, knowing that what is of eternal value is the love and generosity we show each other. In Jesus' name, Amen.*⁶

Going Deeper:

1. Do you have any personal codes of conduct in relation to the environment?

2. Are you interested in creating a personal rule of life around creation concerns?

3. Many Churches are looking ahead to stewardship campaigns - what is the purpose of the Stewardship campaign? To what purpose will the church use the gifts entrusted to them?

4. If all we have is actually God's (a very different view than many truly believe) - how are we using the gifts entrusted to us?

5. Wealth is not bad- the worship of wealth is. How can wealth be used to build the Kingdom?

⁵ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/pledge/>

⁶ In the Meantime - David Losey commentary on Luke