

Sermon

15 Pentecost

It's not so clear cut

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Psalm 79:1-9

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

Of all the scripture passages that are presented to us in the three year lectionary, the one we have just heard may well be the most complex, the most convoluted, and the most contradictory one ever commended to us for study. It's hard to know where to begin! While there are a number of contradictory messages in this passage, there are also some lessons to be learned. Let's start with the big picture.

The gospel of Luke is the gospel of reversals of fortune. The entire message is about the tables being turned; the rich being pulled down from their lofty positions and lifestyles and the poor being elevated. Many of the rich stand for all those who have received their consolation in society and have no need of God's consolation; therefore, they reject the prophet, Jesus. Many of the poor stand for all those who have been rejected by society on the basis of human standards, but are accepted by God; and they accept the prophet, Jesus. They actually realize that they need Jesus and they need to be reminded on a regular basis that they are loved and valued by God. In Luke this message begins even before Jesus is born when Mary sings the Magnificat. The Gospel of Luke is known as the gospel of the Great Reversal. God reverses the poverty and powerlessness of the human condition and those who are caught in it. Israel is caught in an uncompromising position since it is occupied by Roman forces. The societal inequality is compounded by the occupation. Jesus' mission when he begins preaching, teaching and healing in this complex environment is to continuously elevate those who see themselves at the bottom of the social order and to admonish those who actually believe that their wealth and good fortune are made by them alone and insulate them from hardship.

So we enter this scenario with some understanding of the social structure in which these folks are operating. There is a society that also fosters enslavement in a social system that favors the already economically wealthy and continues to repress the lower class and keeps them in abject poverty. These are the two extremes: economically self-sufficient and economically destitute and impoverished. There's little to no 'middle class' here, but the story this morning is about a man 'caught' in the middle.

It seems that the manager for a wealthy landowner hears that he is about to be fired because of mismanagement of funds that belong to his boss. It is the manager's responsibility to collect the funds owed by those working the land of the wealthy landowner and present the money to the landowner. Apparently, the manager has been 'skimming' and hasn't presented all of the collected funds to the owner. When he realizes that he's going to lose his job, he panics and begins to think of ways that he can make a living. He knows he can't do manual labor. He's too old and too out of shape. He also knows that he'd be too embarrassed to become a beggar. He needs to find another way to support himself.

He knows that the landowner is extracting far more from the peasants working the land than is his due, so the manager decides to cut a deal with the peasants. Since the landowner is charging the peasants far more for the use of the land than he should, the manager cuts a deal with them when he comes to collect. Since the rich landlord is charging loanshark rates for the use of the land, if they owe 100 jugs of olive oil, the manager tells them that they should cut the amount of the bill down to 50. He does that for each peasant working the land in the hopes that when he loses his job, the peasants will be so grateful to him for cutting them a break that they will take him into their homes and take care of him. Suddenly, what seems to be situational ethics becomes a reciprocal and unspoken agreement between the manager and the peasants. He has now shifted the relationship from one of exploitation to one of reciprocity. The manager has lifted a burden from them and they are now indebted to him in a different way than monetarily. It has suddenly become a relationship of mutual benefit.

The striking aspect of this parable is that the owner of the land...the manager's boss...commends him for what he has done even though it means that the owner of the land will make less money in the process. The parable doesn't tell us what happens to the manager. Does he actually get fired? Is he forgiven for collecting less money for the owner than was expected? Has the owner changed his mind about how he wants to deal with the peasants?

In Luke, the joy of the Gospel is the joy of God's healing of relationships, including economic relationships. Jesus repeatedly warns that we cannot be disciples while accumulating wealth at the expense of the poor. He never says that we cannot accumulate wealth; he says we can't accumulate wealth at the expense of the poor. Preaching on the vivid parable in Luke 16 means following Jesus into questions of how we practice neighborly love in economic relationships, in the midst of unjust structures. How do we demonstrate more care for people than lust after greed and the accumulation of wealth?

The challenge in this parable is knowing where Jesus wants us to side. There are many interpretive possibilities to this parable; each opens up questions. What we can know is that Luke is making connections between debt structures, the urgency of impending judgment, and the idol of greed. Perhaps the owner of the land saw the value of the manager shifting the relationships with the peasants from one of exploitation to one of mutual aid.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' ministry invokes the biblical concept of Jubilee and debt forgiveness. Economic restitution is part of the joy of Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:53) and the joy of the gospel proclaimed to tax collectors such as Zacchaeus. When Zacchaeus restores what he had "defrauded" four-fold, he is restored also to community, as proclaimed by Jesus, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:8).

But the reality for most people, whether in the Roman Empire in first century Palestine or in the United States in the twenty-first century, is more akin to negotiation, weighing options and choosing who or what to prioritize in decisions with less-than-ideal options. Perhaps Jesus' admiration for the shrewdness of the

generation of the manager and the landowner has this kind of orientation in view.

Money has always been around. It's safe to assume that money always *will* be around. It's not whether or not we have money that will trip us up. It's our attitude about money and our love of money and our lust after money and our belief that money will save us that trips us up. Money is to be used to help keep us alive and when we can, it can be used to help build relationships.

If you sidestep policies about money that exploit others, then you have chosen the better road. You can have allegiance to only one master and that is God. You cannot serve God and wealth simultaneously. If you trust in God and believe in God and are prudent in your decisions, you can know that God will direct your path in all that you do. God provides money. God doesn't mind if you have money. God knows that you need money in order to get your needs met. God cares about your attitude about money. God cares whether or not you value money more than you value God.

With God's help and guidance, we can all use money in the way that God intended rather than simply as the way that benefits us the most in this life.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.