

A Future Waiting for Us

Time after Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, September 23, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Amos 8:4-7; I Timothy 2:1-7;
Psalm 113; Luke 16:1-13

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last Sunday, our student intern, Vicar Mike, told us in his sermon that he had a favorite parable: Jesus' story about the Prodigal Son—the young man who squanders his share of his father's inheritance, strays far from home, and then, when he is most lonely and dejected, finds that his father still loves him and welcomes him back. It is a wonderful story of God's welcoming us. It's probably my favorite parable, too.

This week, we hear another parable—Jesus' story about the dishonest manager. It actually appears in Luke's gospel right after the story of the Prodigal Son, but one rarely hears in clergy circles how this parable about the dishonest manager is a favorite, much-loved, much-retold. Quite the contrary. Pastors seem to loathe preaching on it. And I can tell you honestly that I've had a number of conversations over the years with lay people about this particular story. The conclusion generally reached by ordained and non-ordained alike? What the heck is Jesus talking about? And what was on Luke's mind when he added that story to his gospel?

But you know what? The more I hear this parable, the more I liken it to a piece of music that is rather avant-garde, perhaps even a little discordant or abrasive. I can't call such a piece of music beautiful in the classic sense of the word. I can't say that it warms the cockles of my heart. But I can say the piece of music strikes me in a powerful way. I can't help but notice it and think about it, maybe even puzzle a bit over it. That's what this parable is like for me. And such noticing and thinking, and yes, even puzzling is not a bad thing.

Now, I don't know how this manager ever got his job in the first place. Maybe he's a smooth talker, convincing the rich man he could handle the task of managing the man's finances. All we know is that by the time we meet the manager he's been accused of squandering his boss's property, whether by plain incompetence or outright fraud. We read stories like this in the newspaper all the time, don't we? An audit has been ordered. The manager has to account for the rich man's monies and property. And the manager knows that once that audit is done, and his poor accounting comes to light, his career as a financial manager will be over.

In essence, the manager has no future. At least not one that seems very attractive. He figures he's reduced to manual labor or begging. His physical strength and proud temperament suit him for neither.

And then the light bulb goes on—Aha! (Maybe the manager is not as incompetent as we first thought.) For he sets off on a course of action that suggests he realizes there **is** a future for him. There is something to hope for, a possibility, a potential for life after this present employ.

The manager goes to those who owe his boss money, forgives them a portion of their debt, and hence gets them to pay up the rest they owe. Might be he forgave the portion that normally would be his commission. Might be he forgave the portion considered excessive interest on top of the money initially lent. Hard to say. But we can imagine the response and reaction of those who owed money to the rich man. They were thrilled to be out from under that massive debt. They were delighted by the manager's generous offer. They were more than willing to pay this new amount he said they could owe. They probably liked the manager a whole lot more than before. Why, he probably even made some new friends in the process.

Then—now get this—even his boss, the rich man, commended the manager for his shrewdness. And that's what confuses and irks a lot of folks about this parable. The rich man lauds him up and down, even though the guy has been dishonest. Even though the audit of the accounting ledgers will still show the guy was a poor manager. It strikes a bad chord with us, doesn't it?

Of course, some people get irked by the actions of the welcoming Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. That son hadn't done a lick of good, wasted everything, yet the Father loved and forgave him.

Whether it's your favorite parable, or your least favorite parable, Jesus always succeeds in jarring us, unsettling us, making us look at something or someone from a new point of view.

Today I want you to forget the manager's dishonesty and conniving ways. They are those discordant notes in the avant-garde piece of music I mentioned. Let 'em hit your eardrums and then fade away. Instead, search for the theme, the melody line that runs through the story. And maybe the melody is something like this: For a moment there, the manager thought he had absolutely no future before him. All hope was lost. All resources gone. All options pointless. For a moment there, the dishonest manager was paralyzed in the bleak and dark present.

Frankly, that's what happens to many of us, for many different reasons: A relationship ends. We think we'll never meet anyone again. A career comes to a close. We think our gifts won't ever be put to productive use. The bank account is over-drawn. We think there's no way out from under the crush of debt. The headlines scream about war, terrorism, environmental disaster, crime, poverty, and hunger. We think the world's going to hell in a hand basket and we can do nothing about it. Our health fails. We think our days of sickness, maybe even our final days of life, can't possibly contain anything that is good or has value. Oh, we are managers, all right. We manage to convince ourselves in those various moments that there is no future. We stand there, paralyzed, afraid, and uncertain what to do.

With this parable, Jesus isn't calling us to be dishonest in our dealings with others. With this parable he is calling us, his followers, to act. To act boldly, even in the face of lousy odds and incredible challenges. To act boldly, even when it looks like anything we do is but a drop in the bucket, and the bucket is huge and has a hole in it. He calls us, his followers, to act because, in fact, he says we do have a future. It is a future to be lived under the gracious, just, loving rule of God. It is a future ripe with possibility and potential, where love overcomes evil, light cuts through darkness, and acts of kindness and compassion have the capacity to utterly transform bleak situations and hardened people. That's the future you and I have been invited by our Lord to enter and live in. Right now.

Remember my image about the discordant piece of music? Well, FaithX, you're performing a song called "Liquid" as special music this morning. I've never found that song particularly "beautiful" in the classic sense. It's always been a little abrasive, rough around the edges in its style. Discordant not so much in tune, but in lyrics that are unsettling and jarring as they play in my mind. It's like this parable for me. But as I listen to the song, the theme keeps rising up out of the midst of it in these words: *This is the one thing, the one thing that I know: He didn't die for nothin'*. After thinking about and puzzling over this strange song, I realize it's proclaiming that Jesus is the One who gives us our future. He acts for us.

Jesus was sent into our world—a world whose pain plainly stymies even those not particularly faint of heart. He came as one of us. But unlike us, Jesus, the Son of God, upon entering our broken world, was not paralyzed by this world. Instead, he acted in the face of all its challenges. He acted decisively, boldly, shrewdly for the sake of you and me and all the creation God had made. Everything Jesus taught (even strange parables like today's), every miracle he worked, every deed of compassion he performed declared his message about our future as being with God. His life and then his death and finally his resurrection opened up to us all the possibilities and potential that God envisioned for the world before time began—a divine vision of a harmonious creation overflowing with justice and peace. Jesus acted to put an end to our paralysis, that we might confidently stride into that future.

So, you see, Jesus didn't act for nothin'. And our response to his acting for us must not be "nothin'" either. Our very lives and the small and big things we do from morn till night every day—these are the ways we give praise to the God who brings us into our future. In fact, dare I say that none of the things we do, in the name of Jesus, can be considered "small."

I like to think the writer Madeleine L'Engle would have agreed with me on that. I was sad to read of Madeleine L'Engle's death just a few weeks ago. Did you ever, as a child, read her book *A Wrinkle in Time*? Or read it to your own children? I recommend the book, even for adults. While L'Engle would not have considered that novel for youth to be "religious," it's clear that her deep faith in our good and mighty God runs like a melody line through it. For those of you who read the book, do you recall how the main character Meg finds her younger brother Charles Wallace in terrible trouble, a life-threatening situation? It ends up being her love—simply sheer love—for Charles Wallace that ultimately saves him. That's love overcoming evil and bringing life. Like God's sheer love for us.

Well, Madeleine L'Engle was once asked why she wrote. She said, "Why does anybody tell a story? It does indeed have something to do with faith, faith that the universe has meaning, that our little human lives are not irrelevant, that what we choose or say or do matters, matters cosmically."

And so I say to you this day: Act, with love and confidence and great hope, knowing that our deeds matter, and will be part of the divine dream that envelops us all. **AMEN.**

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