

## *The Hidden Presence of God*

Time after Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

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

“Tell me, what salary are you looking for?” It was the last question in what had been a good, though lengthy, interview. The young interviewee, an engineer by the name Jeff who had just graduated from MIT, answered, “Oh, around \$125,000, depending on the benefits package.”

“Well,” countered the interviewer, “What would you say to a package of five weeks vacation, 14 paid holidays, full medical and dental, company matching retirement fund to 50 per cent of salary, and, oh let’s throw in a company car leased every two years – say, a nice, red Corvette.”

Jeff sat bolt upright in his chair and exclaimed, “Wow! You gotta be kidding!”

“Yeah,” replied the interviewer, “but you started it.”

Maybe that’s what we feel like saying when we hear this morning’s gospel read to us. This parable has to be some sort of a joke, doesn’t it? It is so unlike the other parables Jesus is reported as telling. In those accounts the meaning or the moral of the tale is fairly obvious, and it fits with what Jesus has taught. The problem with this parable is that it seems to commend dishonesty, which is certainly not what Jesus taught and is contrary to the way He lived his life. And here it is as large as life in this morning’s readings, staring us in the face. It won’t surprise you, I am sure, to know that as long as there have been religious people and scholars interpreting this passage, with gallons of ink spilled and forests of paper used, that no one has arrived at any sort of common agreement as to what the parable means. In fact, it’s not at all uncommon for preachers to skip this text and choose either the first or second lesson as the text for their sermons.

But you know me!

Let’s see if we can take a careful and measured look at the parable and see what we can understand from it. Then maybe, just maybe, it will speak to us and how we might shape our own discipleship.

Let’s be honest, though. It doesn’t help that Luke has added three sayings of Jesus at the end, which might be thought to be interpretations. Two of them are very easy to understand: being found faithful with small things, someone can be trusted to be faithful with much, and the saying that one cannot serve two masters. But one, though easily understood, just doesn’t seem to fit because it runs contrary to what Jesus has taught and the way He lived His life. It’s the saying about making friends with and being faithful to dishonest wealth. In fact, it’s this notion that

makes the whole parable so difficult to deal with. What does it mean? How are we to understand it?

Well, let's look. It could be that while all money corrupts, disciples should use it anyway and do as much good as they can with it and earn a place in Heaven. Or, let's say Jesus is being sarcastic – use your wealth, and use it dishonestly if you have to, in order to guarantee the future of your heavenly home. Now it's sarcasm. Remember this is sarcasm, and we know exactly where that home is, don't we? Hell! Not too convincing, though, is it?

Or, does it mean something else? Or could it be that are we on the wrong interpretive track altogether? And, here we are in a place we have been before. How on earth are we to make sense of this parable that we might discern how we are to apply it to our discipleship?

Well, here's what I'm going to suggest. Let's all relax, take a deep breath, sit back, fold your arms, and we'll look at the parable again from a distance.

There are three main characters: the rich man, his manager, and the people who are in debt to the rich man. Let's look first at the manager. It looks like the manager is about to be out of his job as soon as he has given a final accounting of the financial affairs of which he was in charge. Now notice how he acts. He doesn't plead innocence and he doesn't deny his master's charges.

He does, however, realize the game is up and with that in mind, he sets about with what we call these days Enron . . . creative accounting in a way that will protect his future. He will construct for himself what we call a golden parachute (although with the price of oil these days it will probably have to be platinum). He calls the rich man's debtors and has them discount their debts. Imagine that! Sounds like a massive government and Federal Reserve bail-out for everyone involved in the sub-prime mortgage fiasco.

Then there are the debtors who are entirely unaware that the manager is on his way out. They are delighted to comply with the manager's request, and they probably sing the praises of the generous rich man who has dramatically decreased the burden of their debt through the services of his manager. When the manager is looking for a new job, he shouldn't have too much trouble finding one.

Now let's look at the rich man. He was apparently quite happy with the performance of his manager – until someone told him what was going on. The manager was “squandering his property” and the rich man demands an audit telling the manager his days are numbered.

And there is the first amazing thing we learn about the rich man. Why didn't he just go ahead and seize all the property and possessions of his manager, throw him out into the street and leave him with only the clothes on his back? Why didn't he just do that? Or, if it were possible, why didn't he have the dishonest manager prosecuted and thrown in prison? Instead, the rich man demands his manager perform an audit and asks him to report back. He gives the manager time to set the record straight.

But there is more, much more. The manager acts and offers the rich man's debtors fire sale discounts – did you notice them? Twenty and fifty percent. I wouldn't mind that on my mortgage. It doesn't take long for the rich man to find out what's afoot. And then we learn something even more amazing about the rich man. Instead of coming after his manager and then setting out after the debtors who have forged their accounts, the rich man takes the loss.

He pays the price for his manager's shrewd deals. He shows incredible and unusual mercy, and then he commends the manager for his cleverness, his initiative, and his sense of priority.

Do you notice what's happening? We're right back to the place we started at three weeks ago. Do you remember when Jesus was having dinner and there was a scramble for the places of honor? Do you remember what Jesus advised the host at that dinner? Don't look to invite family and friends and people who can repay you, but invite the poor, the lame, the blind, and crippled, those who have no way of returning the favor. Use your wealth to ease the burden of those whose debts are so great they haven't a hope in the world of being able to repay them.

But wait a minute? Are we not also the recipients of that instruction? And, if we are, then doesn't it say something about how should we act with our wealth? With whom should we share our bounty? And who should we be inviting and welcoming to our banquet table?

And, why should we do that? Simply because we ourselves are debtors. We were first invited and welcomed to this banquet table, the cost of which none of us – alone or together – can ever repay. Our debts have been forgiven. And what is it the prayer asks us to do? We are called to forgive those who are in debt to us.

The banquet spread for us today is small and humble indeed, just tiny wafers and wine but they are a foretaste of a great feast to come. For in partaking of that banquet our debts are forgiven, completely discounted, if you will, and we are assured that our final destination will be a heavenly home. And then we have the opportunity, the time, the chance to respond, not by attempting to pay off our debt, because it is far too great, but to spend ourselves, all of what we are, and all what we have, for Christ's sake.

Called to invite others to come to the table and into Christ's living presence from the dark and hostile world in which we all struggle to survive. Such faithfulness is successfully accomplished in small, and often stained and tainted ways, not great, perfect, huge acts done in a world living under the illusion of grand achievements and celebrity adulation as if they somehow demonstrated divine blessing and approval. For it is the faithfulness in small things, even though they be imperfect, it is in serving Christ as master, it is in the faithful use of what wealth one has, that the hallmark of discipleship is to be found.

I like to think that perhaps Graham Greene was thinking of this parable when he wrote "The Whisky Priest." Serving in a Mexican village the priest grew fat eating the food provided by the peasants at their poor celebrations. Without much dedication or purpose, he baptized and regularly celebrated the sacrament of the mass, partly because this provided him with prestige and partly because these acts brought him fees and invitations to the meals after the baptisms and

weddings and funerals. So it was that the sacrament of Holy Communion came to be for him a means of his livelihood.

As the Mexican state became more and more opposed to the church in Green's story, the celebration of the mass became a dangerous act, punishable by death. But this undisciplined priest did not leave his home and continued to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice until it finally led to his own. The death of an alcoholic priest who was able to turn wine into the blood of Christ until a firing squad spilled his blood on the dry and dusty ground. The death of Christ became his death, and the people for whom he could not stop offering the sacrament despite his dishonest use of it, then after his death, the people, began to see him as a martyr through whom they could have faith in life and faith in the presence of God hidden in an unbelieving world.

Amen.