

Living with Gratitude



“Living with Gratitude – You Are Never Alone”

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday & Sunday, September 21–22, 2019

All Services

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Luke 16:1-13

A couple of weeks ago, I told you that I like to file Jesus' stories in imaginary file folders. Well, friends, we've come to another story that needs to be filed. This parable from Luke's Gospel is filed in the folder: Confusing Stuff Jesus Said. I mean come on... I saw the confused looks on your faces as I read today's gospel. Sometimes Jesus is crystal clear. Then, he tells a story like 'The Dishonest Manager' and we are all left wondering what Jesus just said. I'm serious, friends. I am not the first, nor will I be the last preacher to be confounded by Jesus' story here in Luke. Every commentary, every writer made the comment that this story is confusing. One writer even calls this “the problem child” of all Jesus' parables. We aren't alone, even the smartest of people are confused by Jesus. So, let's look at this parable a little more; maybe we can make some sense of it.

There's the rich man, who probably owned a lot of land, and there's his manager: the man in charge of his books and his land until the rich man finds out that his manager has been “squandering his property.” The rich man calls this guy in and confronts him about what he's been doing. Basically, he asks to see the accounting books. What follows seems to be an internal monologue from the manager: “I'm losing my job. What should I do? I'm not strong enough for manual labor and I'm too proud to beg.” The manager decides to call in the folks who are indebted to his boss and reduces the amount they owe. But, there's a plot twist and it's confusing! The rich man commends the manager! And why? It makes no sense! Didn't the manager just cheat his boss? And that's when Jesus seems to say, “be dishonest like this guy.”

There are a few things we need to look at before we move any further with this parable. First, we need a crash course in first century economics in Roman-occupied Galilee. Are you ready?

Rich landowners, like the rich man in this parable, were like loan sharks. They'd use high interest loans to gather more land and more wealth for themselves, essentially stealing land and money from poor peasants. They'd find ways to hide interest, often by rolling it into the principal. The equivalent of these first century practices today would be high interest student loans or predatory payday loans.

Now maybe that doesn't shock you, but what these wealthy landowners were doing was in direct opposition to what the Bible calls for. See Exodus 22:25: “If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you

shall not exact interest from them.” Or Deuteronomy 15:7-8: “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.”

So, when the manager reduces the debts of several people, couldn't we say he was doing the right thing for those in need, even if it was dishonest toward the rich man? Couldn't we say he was just doing what the law of God commands by forgiving the interest on these debts? Couldn't we say he was doing exactly what Jesus was calling for throughout Luke's Gospel: a reversal of fortunes, lifting the poor, caring for the vulnerable.

Throughout Luke's Gospel Jesus (and his mother!) proclaims that God loves and cares for those in need. Remember the Magnificat: “[God] has lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things...” Or what Jesus reads from that scroll in the temple: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” Or the Beatitudes: “Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God.”

What about the rich man? Maybe the rich man commends his manager for helping him to change his ways, for teaching him that sometimes – or all the time – he should do the right thing. He should do what God calls him to: to care for those in need.

So, what does this mean for us? What is Jesus calling us to by sharing this confusing parable? Let's look to what Jesus says after he tells this story because for the first time in this reading Jesus is clear. Jesus wants us to think about our relationship with money. He says, “No one can serve two masters; for you will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

This story and Jesus' commentary that follows are meant to get us thinking about our money, how we use our money. Jesus talks about money like it is an idol; in fact, the Greek uses the word *Mammon* in the place of wealth. Jesus is personifying wealth, meaning that it is possible to worship money like we worship God. Throughout the Middle Ages, *Mammon* became a character in literature. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *Mammon* is a fallen angel that values material wealth above all things and leads people astray. And according to Martin Luther, *Mammon* is the “most common god on earth.”

Not much has changed since Jesus' time or the Middle Ages. Money still plays an important role in our lives and in our society. We live in a world that worships money. We live in a world that prioritizes the accumulation of wealth over the sharing of wealth. We live in a world where money dictates our lives, sometimes even our happiness. In our world, *Mammon* is alive and well. Money is an idol; money is a religion.

So today, Jesus asks us: Who do you serve? God or money? And remember, how we spend our money says a lot about who we serve. We serve money when we hold too

tightly to our earthly things. We serve money when we squirrel it away. We serve money when we are tight-fisted and hard-hearted. We serve money when we allow it to rule our lives, dictate our emotions.

But we serve God when we use our money – what God has given us - for God's purposes, not our own. We serve God when we give our money away to care for others, to help those in need, to feed empty bellies. We serve God when we are generous and kind, giving without judgment, second thoughts, or preconceived notions.

All that we have is God's, friends: our money, our possessions, our very selves. These are all things that God has given us, and God has also given us grace. God gives us so much! God gives us everything, and in response, we are called to share it. In response, we are called to serve God.

So, who do you serve?

Amen.

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