

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 16:1-13
September 15th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

I appreciate the quandary Luke's parable puts us in. Theologians with doctorate degrees wring their hands trying to make sense of it. Preachers go out of their way to preach some other passage or maybe even the collect.

So many questions start swirling: Why does the landowner fire and then commend his "dishonest manager"? Is Jesus giving us a free pass for larceny and embezzlement as long as we bring it to the church? As tempting as it may be to send you out with permission to commit crimes for the collection plate, to be clear, that's REALLY not what Jesus is teaching here.

It *is* a parable about God's people and about God and, yes, it is about money. Sort of. Let me just say that, if you find yourself scratching your head with perplexity, you are not alone. It's not that you aren't smart enough; it's not for lack of effort. This passage is troubling because we live in the Northwest corner of the U.S. in the 21st century.

Over the course of 2,000 years, our concepts about money have changed. In the mid-19th century, U.S. money was based on the gold standard that linked the value of cash to the value of actual gold held in reserve. To get us out of the Great Depression, we abandoned the gold standard and later cut

the link between the dollar and gold entirely. The U.S. dollar is no longer connected to any specific asset.

Another massive change began in 1968, when a man named Dee Hock founded the “non-organization” organization that came to be known as VISA International. Dee’s innovation separated money from physical currency and from centralized banks. Money became even more like an idea than a tangible possession: electronic bits shifting from databank to databank.

First century Mediterraneans would be completely stymied by our notions of money and economics. And here’s why the Luke’s parable is baffling to us: we don’t understand their perceptions much better!

In *their* world, the economy was based entirely on agriculture. Notions like “blue collar” or “white collar,” “urban” or “rural”, even financially “rich” or “poor” didn’t really apply. For them, the only distinction that really counted was much simpler: You owned land or didn’t. And if you didn’t, you worked land. The landowner controlled production and the profits. Those who worked the land had no real control or access to any surplus.

In Luke’s story, Jesus draws our attention to a landowner with enough wealth to have a steward managing farm production. The people working the land owe the landowner rent, but money was not the only – or even the *primary* – medium of exchange. Some did pay with money while others paid a percentage of the olive oil and wheat they farmed on the owner’s property.

Still others, like the people in Luke’s story, paid a *fixed* amount of the crop. The folks in the parable owe about 900 gallons of oil – the equivalent of little less than three years of pay for one day-laborer – as well about 150 bushels of wheat, worth more than eight years of pay for one farmer.

The steward is on the hook for squandering the owner’s property. And under extreme pressure, he comes up with a solution that is ingenious. Let me give you a little background so you can see what he did.

What Jesus *didn’t* tell us was that once the landowner discovered his steward’s incompetence or thieving, he *could* have made the steward pay the entire cost of what he squandered. Or he could have had the steward tossed in prison. Or he could have him fined *and* imprisoned. All of these very public actions would have damaged the steward’s reputation for the rest of his life, making it all but impossible for him to find managerial work again.

The people listening to Jesus would have expected to hear that the steward was imprisoned or forced to pay the staggering financial penalty. Instead, much to the surprise of the steward and everyone hearing this story,

what we encounter instead is the unexpected mercy of the owner who only fired the steward. Nothing more.

Recognizing his brief window of opportunity, the steward moves fast before the farmers hear that he has been fired. He goes to each of them, one by one, and gets them to change their bills, making them accomplices in his questionable behavior. Now, they are all in it together!

And if the farmers are in an awkward position, the master appears to be in an even more complicated dilemma. If he *allows* these reduced new contracts to stand, he will be short on financial profit at the end of the year. If he *rejects* the new contracts, he will provoke the anger and alienation of the farmers and the entire village who are already celebrating his generosity.

And there it is.

Right there is the reason that the master is impressed with the steward's choice.

From our 21st c. perspective, we may be confused by a man who chooses to commend an employee who apparently defrauded him. We live in a world of debit and credit cards, automatic billing and deposits; a world where material wealth involves intangible electronic databases.

Luke's Jesus is speaking to a world where wealth also involves intangibles – just different ones. Wealth in the ancient world also involves honor and reputation.

And despite the consequences of being fired for his squandering, the steward has figured out a way to reduce his future risk and give rise to enough honor for the master to far outweigh his losses. And because the landowner can recognize that his wealth is more than money, he can see the good his wealth can spread without being attached to it or identified with it.

His decision is simple.

He will lose some crop income, but he and the steward will see their honor and reputation spread. Even the farmers can enjoy the anticipation that they might live above the subsistence level where they normally found themselves, at least for the next harvest season.

The master has made the steward accountable for his dishonesty by firing him, and yet, by allowing the situation to play out, the master has also seen evidence of new wisdom. This is often the pattern that Jesus follows to illuminate the awareness of his followers, making “children of the age” who are prudent in the ways of the world into “children of light” who are prudent in the ways of God's Spirit.

Several years ago, I worked with Dee Hock, the man who founded VISA International and changed our economic system forever. We exchanged emails just last week and he, in fact, *still* hopes to expand our awareness of the good that responsibly shared wealth can stimulate.

Dee frequently uses a word that most of us don't. It's a good word; the root of the word "education," and it captures the way Jesus taught and the way the landowner interacted with the squandering steward. The word is "educate." And it means "to bring or draw forth something already present in a latent or undeveloped form." Dee says that "where behavior is educated, there lies leadership. Where behavior is *induced*, there lies manipulation. Where behavior is compelled, there lies tyranny."

The landowner could have legally compelled the steward's behavior. Instead, he chose to let the man bring something more inventive out of himself. The steward chose to manipulate his situation, only to discover unexpected mercy and grace. And that discovery allowed him to move beyond threats to his social and physical life to discover uncharted territory in his spiritual life.

Just so, Jesus invites his listeners to tend to their social and physical survival while also moving more intentionally toward our spiritual well-being. "And I tell you," Jesus says, "make friends for yourselves from the *Mammon of unrighteousness* (a better rendering of Luke's Greek) - make friends for yourselves from the Mammon of unrighteousness, so that when it gives out they may welcome you into the tents of the Age."

By itself, wealth is not evil or sinful. Wealth, money, can involve much more than tangible materials; wealth can do a great deal of good and help incredible beauty to arise. Wealth becomes "mammon" when we become attached to it, bound to it, identified with it.

Mammon is anything – any money, material wealth or any entity other than God – that we trust to give that which only God can deliver: unconditional love, rock-solid security, eternal life.

If we enslave ourselves to mammon, we will try to manipulate or compel God into serving our earthly acquisitions. We pray for material wealth and see every advance as evidence of God's favor.

If we bind ourselves to God, our true wealth expands even as our material fortunes rise and fall. We strip our material wealth of its role as a surrogate god and allow it to simply be for us among the many resources we use to serve God.

In that way, our wealth can provide some relative security without seducing us into imagining that it provides ultimate and eternal security. By using our material wealth to establish loving relationships with our neighbors, God can educe from us, draw out from among us, dormant and budding insights for welcoming all creation into the joyful reign of heaven; the tents of the Age and our eternal home.

Works cited or consulted:

- Greene, Adam Lewis. *Bibliotheca*. Santa Cruz, CA: Writ Press, 2016.
- Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Hock, Dee. Personal communication.
- Levine, Amy-Jill, and Ben Witherington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus: Cycle C*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997.
- Shea, John. *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006.