

True riches

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Collect for Proper 20, The Book of Common Prayer, page 234

THE 18TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (LECTIONARY: PROPER 20C)

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

September 18, 2016

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 16:1-13

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."

If you are looking for the good guy in this morning's gospel reading, you might as well give up now.

This parable (or spiritual

riddle) from Jesus about the dishonest manager is probably the most confounding of all of the parables.

A quick reminder about

parables: these are made-up stories – fiction – told by Jesus to teach and often to disrupt conventional thinking. While both those who wrote them down in scripture and many teachers and scholars since try to give parables a specific meaning, they are meant to be unresolved brain teasers.

And this parable, among them all, has been called “the problem child” of biblical interpretation by one of Christianity’s greatest theologians.

So we’re not going to “solve” this one here this morning. People have been puzzling over what this parable can possibly mean for literally centuries – and will continue to puzzle tomorrow and on into the future.

Which is to say it is a very good parable...

With not very good people...

...or with good people acting and speaking in dubious circumstances.

On the face of it: there is a dishonest manager who, for his dishonesty is commended by the boss who just fired him and then Jesus praises both of them with advice to his hearers that seems completely out of character.

Jesus was aware of how the world works. He didn’t look at the world in which he lived – and in which each of us lives – through rose-colored glasses. He wouldn’t be shocked that EpiPens can cost

\$30 one day and \$600 the next. (He probably wouldn’t like it, but he wouldn’t have been surprised by it.) He knew money played a big part in life – as it continues to do today. Money can and does determine a lot of outcomes.

It sounds as if Jesus is saying that being smart about money is not necessarily bad – and may be good. Our Finance Committee and Vestry agree with this idea.

The problem in dealing with this parable is he delivers this message while praising a manager presented as dishonest.

Are we supposed to be dishonest?

No, of course not.

We don’t know why he puts his message this way in this parable – but it caught people’s when Jesus told it – and ever since.

So while offering this notion of being smart about money, Jesus offers another lesson about money that we also know is true.

The security we get from money – even at best – doesn’t last.

The manager had a job, lost his job, got praised for being clever – his fortunes rising and falling along the way.

While the money he had could be well used, it was not going to provide the bedrock that his life needed as a foundation.

Martin Luther, the great figure of the reformation in the 16th century called money “the most

common god on earth.”

And Jesus starts with talking about money – and may also be talking about not only money but anything we rely on to be God for us, but is not actually God.

Jesus is focusing – uncomfortably, to be sure – on our loyalties – whatever we are counting on to make us whole people, living fruitfully within the whole human community.

What is our foundation? What do we return to again and again and again hoping for life.

For a foundation, one needs God and the relationship with God that we sometimes call faith – but not faith as a concept, an ideal, a belief system, an assent to certain propositional truths.

No, faith as a verb, as way of living in the world.

Having this relationship with God does not make money evil – it changes the questions we ask when it comes to money – or when it comes to anything else that *can* become ultimate.

Is our money going to serve our faith or is our faith going to serve money? In worshiping the living God, how shall we use our money – and what we know about money – to serve the world God so loves? How do we spend what we have purposefully – how do we use our resources of any sort – to accomplish what God is leading us to accomplish? This is a personal,

individual question as well as one directed to faith communities and to the wider world

We might also get at it by asking, what do hold onto with white knuckles? What do we try to take as ours alone? When do we feel in competition with others? When do we say: that is MINE?

When money is God, we often see individual lives and lives of organizations, businesses, governments and churches becoming deformed, getting off course and tearing up people’s lives and the world generally speaking – wastefully, violently, disastrously.

When God is God, money can and often is used to create enormous good, to meet real human needs, to bring forth beauty, to enrich whole communities with what truly sustains them.

We can extend this thought to other aspects of life that have value: our abilities, our time, our selves – are they the focus as if they were God or are they part of how we live out our relationship with our compassionate God? We can also extend this thought to what we hold in common with other people – like here at St. Mark’s: how do we use our building, how do we schedule our calendar, how do we welcome or close off access to the richness of a shared life – all of the opportunities inherent in being “us.”

And that same exercise you can apply to work or school or neighborhood – or our larger civil life in this country.

We also see in this gospel reading: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much...” We know that life often comes to us in very little ways – in small decisions, small acts, small demands, small instances of creativity in which we spend what we have and who we are...

How do our faith lives and our economic lives connect? On what are we relying to be God for us individually or all together? These are not easy questions and they have to be answered every day. We won't always come up with the best answer. We won't always do the very best thing. But are we more and more trusting God to be God? Are we more and more recognizing that money or time or some talent we have may serve God but is not God?

What practices are we taking into our lives that will help us awaken, become more and more conscious and attuned to God?

Let us pray:

God increase our love of you – and in that love may we find true riches, riches that change how we view all that we are, all that we have and the decisions we make from day to day.

Amen.



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