



SUNDAY SERMON

Who You Gonna Serve?

A Reading from the Book of Amos, chapter 8, verses 4-7

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 16, verses 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."

Bob Dylan sang it: "You gotta serve somebody – yes, you gotta serve somebody. ... it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody."

He was partly quoting Jesus:

"No servant can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and wealth."

Is this true? I know a lot of people who are trying like crazy to serve both—including me and the institutional church structure of which I am a part, with our generous pension plans. Is this Good News?

Can we enjoy our wealth without letting it run us? See it as God's gift entrusted to us to nurture and grow, not ours to keep and horde?

Jesus tells this story about a dishonest employee who gets caught, lands on his feet and earns commendation instead of condemnation. He contrasts this fellow with "children of light," which presumably we want to be.

What do we make of this? Parables are open to many interpretations. They are multi-faceted – you look at one head on, it appears to say one thing; you turn it just slightly, or look from the perspective of another character and, "Whoa, I never noticed that before ..." So it is with this parable, sometimes labeled "The Dishonest Steward," and sometimes "The Shrewd Manager." Which is it? Yeah. Let's forget titles and look at the story:

Continued

DATE

The Eighteenth Sunday
after Pentecost
Sun., Sept. 18, 2016

PREACHER

The Rev. Kate Heichler

READINGS

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

A rich man finds out his caretaker is squandering his estate. He calls him in, chews him out, and demands an accounting. The manager realizes he's about to be fired. He doesn't want to do manual work or beg – so he cooks up a scheme. He calls in the man's debtors and lowers each one's bill if he'll pay up. Now he has some income to show the boss – and the boss commends him for his savvy.

What to make of this guy? Paying less than you owe is certainly a time-honored business practice—Amos inveighs against it in the reading we heard this morning. And there are prominent people in our day who have made a career of paying their vendors cents on the dollar, who seem to be lauded as good business people. It's all fine ... Unless you're the person who received only 40% of what the contract said...

Still, in this story everybody comes away with something, right? The master gets part of what is owed him; the debtors get a deal; and the manager buys himself some friends, and, it appears, even keeps his job. Win/win/win.

This character behaves in a rather unethical way—but instead of being punished, he is rewarded. Is Jesus suggesting we use dishonest wealth to buy friends? If that were true, wouldn't every church in Washington would be full? Or are we seeing Jesus at his most sarcastic?, saying, "Hey—if you want to get ahead on your own, go for it. You'll make friends in this world. If you want to be my disciple, you need to trust me."

Jesus set his parables in many milieus – on farms, in kitchens, in pastures and vineyards—and many in the world of commerce and finance. By some measures, Jesus talked about finance and how we use—and get used by—our money more than any other subject. Because money and managers are great metaphors for understanding our relationship to the gifts God gives us to enjoy and nurture and invest. And because he knew that our relationship with money speaks volumes about our level of faith and trust and openness to the grace of God. Lest we think our spiritual lives are here and our business lives there, Jesus brings God-Life into all of it.

Even so, I don't think this parable has any more to do with business than the parable of the good shepherd has to do with sheep. This story is about living in the Realm of God, and the currency of the Realm of God is grace. And grace goes beyond the contract.

We may start to get inside this story if we shift our focus from the dishonest steward to the boss who accepts his shenanigans. Because aren't there times in our lives when we've received the forgiveness and grace of God and other people despite our shenanigans? Maybe we've never cheated at business or on our taxes, or on a spouse ... but I don't think any of us can get very far without hurting ourselves or someone else, without wanting more than is given, or occasionally taking it, turning away from God at one point or another. Maybe what Jesus is lifting up in this strange tale is the forgiveness available to us.

As we understand that we have been recipients of amazing grace, we are able to shift our trust from our own self-saving strategies and ways of getting by in this world, to trusting in God's ways and God's life moving through us. We can't put our trust both in wealth and in God—trust is finite. The more we trust in one, the less we trust in the other.

And the ways of God and the ways of the world are not the same, and often incompatible. We hear it in Isaiah, "... my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord ..." (55:8) and in Paul, "What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God ..." (I Cor 2:12). We see it in the way Jesus instructs his followers to behave in ways that are not "natural"—to turn the other cheek on attackers, to give up one's possessions if asked, to risk one's life in service to others. These are not the ways of the world, nor of those who would succeed on the world's terms. Living God's way is "paying the full bill."

We who follow Christ are called a delicate balance, to live in the world, to love this life we've been given and all its gifts—and to hold it lightly, not to confuse it with the realm of God. AND we are called to live in the life of God here and now, to give ourselves fully, not "cut down the bills" and give only a part of what God desires from us.

That's hard to do in this world, and thank God we live in the grace of the One who keeps accepting our 30 and 40 and 80 percents. The more we receive God's love and forgiveness, the more we want to allocate our resources God-ward. That includes the way we spend our time and our energies and our gifts, making ourselves available for God's mission of restoration and wholeness through St. Columba's and beyond it. If you're good at organizing, or listening, or managing volunteers, don't just use that skill in your job. Bring it into your missional life.

And the resources we are called to release our grip on include our finances—Jesus isn't using the word wealth figuratively. He means our bank accounts and investment portfolios, our houses and storage units and the stuff that fills them. And with money, we get a really good deal. The Biblical tradition of the tithe suggests we enjoy 90 percent of what comes our way, and release 10 percent to support God's mission in the world. 90 percent—that's a good deal! We can do a lot with 90 percent of our income. When our stewardship season kicks off in a few weeks, and you're having a conversation with a fellow parishioner or staring down a pledge card on your kitchen table, I hope you will figure out a percentage of your income that you can manage, and pledge that. For me, 10 percent of net works well. If it's not 10, go with 8 or 5 or 2 and try that on. I'm pretty sure you'll increase

it, because in my experience when we give to God off the top, we never miss it. But when we fix on a dollar amount and put it in with all the other budget items, it often feels like a stretch.

If we want to increase our capacity for transforming the world through St. Columba's, I hope we will each accept the invitation to put more and more of our trust in the life of God, more and more of our faith in the amazing power and love that God has unleashed in this world through Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, and now through you and me.

We worship a God who wants to fill our lives with blessing. We need open hands to receive those gifts, not clutching, open. We need open minds to imagine the grace that commends us, even when our performance isn't so good. We need open hearts to love even a fraction as much as we are loved. That's the wealth that is God – and that we can serve whole-heartedly.

I'd like to think there was another part of Jesus' story that Luke left out—what happened to the steward after his interview. Maybe we find him outside his boss' office, shaking his head.

“Well, that went a whole lot better than I thought it would. I thought I'd be heading from here to the unemployment office. But he seemed pleased with me. Here, I've been phoning it in for the past year, not really doing my job; I'm called on the carpet, about to get canned, and instead I'm rewarded? What just happened?

And what do I do now? I have all these new friends – these vendors who got to pay less than they owed. I could go work for one of them ... But you know, I think I want to stick with this guy. And I think I'd like to start actually working. If we could do this well with my blunders, think what we could accomplish if I were actually working with him, giving my all?”