

**Sermon, 23 September 2007—Proper 20**

Amos 8:4-12; Psalm 138; I Timothy 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

No doubt about it: if we all followed the example of the manager in this parable, the entire world of economic exchange would come crashing down around us. Whether or not he was dishonest before, he is now: we watch him doctor the books and compromise his associates centuries before Pennsylvania Avenue was plotted through the swamp. Shockingly, his master, whom he is caught in the act of cheating, commends him. So this morning, let's wonder how it is possible that Luke, the master the manager serves, and Jesus, all commend this reprehensible duplicitous little ferret.

To understand what this parable might mean for Luke—and therefore what he hopes it will mean for his readers—recognize that it is one moment in Luke's long campaign to bring about an economic conversion among the wealthy members of his congregation. Our disadvantage is that we hear it in isolation when our hymns and prayers stop to consider an extracted chip of Gospel, a single jewel encased in a liturgical setting. It would be better to stumble on it in passing as we read the entire book, because it is one of the first bread crumbs on Luke's lengthy risky path luring the rich towards repentance. After all, Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem when he tells this story.

Remember the shrewd pragmatic advice we heard several Sundays ago: when you go to a banquet, sit on the lower seat, so your host can invite you to come up higher in the presence of all; and when you throw a party, invite the poor who cannot repay you, so God will incur the social obligation of reciprocal hospitality and will invite you to the heavenly banquet at the end of time. This is generosity as self-service and salvation as self-interest. Should any one who thinks this way actually make it to heaven by God's

grace, they will not know how to sing in a choir—but I suppose Purgatory could end up being choir practice. Luke is trying to appeal to someone so self-absorbed, that the considerations are all general: they apply to any banquet with any host and to all categories of poor and needy. There is hardly any recognition of actual people, let alone actual mutual dependence.

We are further along the path of human interaction and commitment in this parable. The dishonest manager sits down with those who actually owe his master money and works out terms with them that lighten their specific burdens. Yes, here again we see someone doing the right thing for the wrong reason, but at least for this brief moment, the protagonist is beginning to see other people in the concrete realities of their financial liabilities. This is *one* step towards Luke's vision of full community: I can realize that other people have specific limitations and anxieties, which I can ease—even if I am helping them for my own survival! It is hardly the fullness of Christian empathy and generosity, but without this step, we won't get to those at all!

So Luke advises us to make friends by means of dishonest wealth, so that we shall be welcomed into the eternal homes. Practice compassion, even with a financially shrewd outcome, so those who are compassionate will recognize you and receive you as one of their own. In this life, forgive debts generously, so that your own debts will be forgiven in the next. Luke can imagine and propose a way to be saved based even on self-interest, so he commends this parable and incorporates it into his Gospel.

But what about the landowner, whose accounts payable the manager is devaluing? Here, I am afraid, we can only speculate, because we do not know the back-story that came before the episode Jesus tells us. At this point in their relationship, the distrust between them is harsh. Equally harsh is the punishment: expulsion. In that age, survival outside a household was

difficult—just as those trained in our day as middle managers have no easily marketable skills outside a corporation. The manager admits, “I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg.” His panic about his foreseeable destitution converts him from a careless squanderer into a manipulator and a liar. When the master finds this out, though, he commends the manager as "prudent." Why?

Some scholars speculate that the manager was urging those who owed his master money to trim off the interest his master was charging on the loan they had received. Usury was forbidden by Jewish law. For what it is worth, the manager relieved the master of the sin of usury and enhanced his household's reputation in the community. What can the master be but grateful? The master, of course, finds the manager has outmaneuvered him, striking him a blow on his exposed flank. The manager gets the satisfaction of an untouchable revenge. The master can hardly demand that the manager reinstate what the master never had a right to charge; so he has to swallow his losses and concede defeat. Perhaps jackals do admire each other's teeth.

Other scholars say the manager is removing what he himself extorted as executor of each transaction: he inflated the loans as the price of doing business with him and with his master's wealth, intending to pocket the excess himself. Removing his own illicit profit from the debt is an act of shrewd penance, by which he tacitly appears to accept his master's accusation of crookedness and rectifies it. He imposes on himself the same punishment that a careful audit of his books would have earned him, hoping to ward off the greater punishment of total dismissal from the household. His penance is shrewd because he earns the grudging gratitude of the debtors at the same time. The master acknowledges that the manager has saved his assets by anticipating and preempting the results of a judicial process.

Perhaps, though, the master is astonished at the manager's ability to act decisively. The manager's reputation was wastefulness and carelessness, yet he demonstrates in a crisis that he can act pragmatically, creatively, quickly. In some ways, the manager is exemplary because he does not dodge what is necessary. He faces his financial crisis realistically, and he cuts through what remains of his integrity to provide for it. His master, who already disliked and distrusted the manager enough to expel him, who had no admiration of him to lose, comes to see that the manager had canny guiding principles after all, and, in light of his ruthless pursuit of his outcome, calls him "prudent," as one shrewd business dealer might tip his hat to another.

However, how can Jesus endorse the manager's actions? Our business sense tells us not only that the manager's punishment is sure, but that he is compounding the interest on that punishment by corrupting his master's accounts. When at the end, his master and Jesus and Luke all endorse what he has done, we realize that the thimble we had our eye on doesn't have the pea under it after all. Jesus tricks us with this unsavory story of obvious chicanery just as the manager tricked his master. And not only have we been tricked, but our sense of right and wrong has been unspeakably offended!

Jesus' story is a masterpiece of misdirection. When we first hear that this story is about property management, we settle down with our sense of sound business practice and our prejudice for justice to scan the manager's fiscal activity. With overconfident attention, we follow the hands shuffling the thimbles, thinking we have tracked each tricky move. The shock Jesus gives us is deliberate, because it forces us to turn back and say, "Wait! What did I miss?" The story must not be about finances, but about something else.

If this were the only such offensive baffling story Jesus told, we could avert our eyes and walk past it whistling; but it is not. What of the father who gives his son half his wealth, only to welcome him back once he has wasted it all? What of the sower recklessly hurling seeds among thorns, on rocks, along the path? What of the vineyard owner who pays all his workers the same wage, regardless of time worked? What of the shepherd, who *abandons* ninety-nine sheep in the *wilderness* and wanders off looking for the one he notices is missing and brings *that one* home rejoicing? What of the vineyard owner who leases his land and goes away, only to send his son to be killed when the tenants decide to claim the vineyard for themselves? What of these irresponsible codependent oblivious reckless lax guys? Something must be valued here that doesn't fit our sense of right and wrong.

Well, what is the pea that Jesus offers under the thimble? What is he suggesting you must focus your attention and exert your keenest efforts to obtain? A merchant, Jesus tells us, saw a perfect pearl and sold all he had to buy it. That's yet another bad business model—but what would you do, when what is most valuable to you, what you have always hoped for and looked for, is now suddenly within your reach? Today's story is the same story, but it is told entirely in negative characters and in negative actions: a corrupt manager saw his doom and became even more corrupt in order to survive. As Jesus sardonically comments, “the children of this world are shrewder than the children of light!” If the manager pushed himself that far for what perishes, what are you doing, Jesus asks, for what endures?

If only we were as intent, as astute, in bringing about God's realm of love and justice! Of course we must ask what that realm would look like here at St. John's. But we must equally ask what we are willing to do to bring it about. The manager did not hesitate to bring himself even deeper

into jeopardy for the sake of his own survival, using what perishes to buy time for what perishes. But our claim and our goal is eternal life! Shouldn't that call forth as much effort? Many of you already expend your self for our common life; but is it possible to sit down with others, as the manager did, and reach beyond business as usual to risk a new way of being together? As an urgent example, consider our young people. While the discernment team does its work, re-envisioning our ministry with youth, what would it be like for you to review the balance sheet of your life, your energy and time, and rewrite it, even slightly, to the living benefit of our young people, allotting time and energy to them, lowering their losses?

If only we had the manager's cleverness and deliberateness in coordinating forgiveness and in constructing peace! Notice that in this parable, the past is open for revision: the manager tells debtors to rewrite the accounts they owe. I recall times I opened certain long-term investments of resentful memories, hoping to draw on their interest deep into my old age. Yet when I reached crisis, when the waste of my life was apparent all around me, I had to refinance. The debts I had determined the other person owed me had to be lowered or cancelled, by drawing down the accumulation of my compounded righteous anger. That meant sitting down with them and finding a way to say, "how much do you owe? one hundred? take your bill and write fifty." My vengeful surcharge, which was to extort from them the bottom line admission that I was right after all, had to be written off, in order to lighten the account of our past and to provide for our future.

If only we were as ready to be as risky as the manager, when it comes to relaxing and sinking beneath the surface of our concepts into the terror of empty prayer to touch the Ground of Being! Every spiritual teaching has, from certain angles of vision, a razor-sharp edge that, at certain moments,

can be used to cut us away from all that surrounds us. The prudence Christ commends is ruthlessness about taking up that knife ourselves and driving it deep into what binds us, without flinching, and cutting it away. That is what the manager did. The nest he thought he had feathered through theft had to be emptied of all its down if he was to have any chance of survival. At those moments, we bring no one with us; we can save no one else.

At those moments, we pray without knowing in the presence of God, our master, who has every reason to be skeptical about our integrity and our intention. The ground of our self is not self-possessed. We do not own our own depths. We will render accounts. And every concept of what we expect from God which we bring to that darkness, every religious contract we have trumped up and corrupted, trying to certify and cement our own advantage, has to be trimmed of its delusions.

Mysteriously at those moments, when we think we are the ones tense to set the terms, we come into the presence of the Manager of Life, whose handling of accounts has always seemed suspicious and unreliable to us, whose generosity looks like foolishness to us, who puts himself at risk for us, and we hear that Voice say, “you think you owe seventy? Take your bill and write thirty. No, better yet, dear one, since you have come here, shove it into the shredder; your debts aren’t why I was calling you to me.”

In Christ, prudence always ends up tempered by Love. Our salvation never was our own doing, but God's gift. The only One who can truly provide for our future has already done so when we were incorporated into the Body of Christ. To that Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, from whom we have received all things and to whom we will render all accounts, to the One God be honor and glory, this day and always.