

C Lectionary 25 9.18.22

Luke 16:1-13

Focus Statement: The world is hard and complicated. God knows that and wants for us wisdom.

I meet every other week on zoom with a group of pastors to talk about the upcoming texts. This is the reformation of a group I used to meet with when I was in California, and in fact one of the only gifts of the pandemic for me was that this group reconstituted on zoom. I met these folk when I was a baby pastor, and in a lot of ways I learned from them how to be a pastor. You all may or may not always appreciate their education of me, because they only feed my tendency to wander into the weeds. They are smart, well-read, articulate, theologically minded. Our conversations are always deep and broad ranging. I share this because we talked about this morning's gospel text for well over an hour on Tuesday, and in the end just moved on, no closer to understanding it than we were when we started. I kept waiting for one of them to give me the insight that would crack this parable wide open for me, while Mark kept asking me, Kjersten, any brilliant insights to add? Guys, I'll be frank, this is a hard and weird text. So rather than try to explain the parable to you, because I can't explain it, I'm hoping what we're going to do in the next ten minutes or so is let this parable challenge us. Open some of the questions it invites us into. See what ideas it makes us consider. This is a parable for the disciples, which means, given Jesus' tendency to challenge those closest to us, it's meant to challenge our assumptions.

Part of what makes this parable weird is we don't really know what the manager is doing when he changed the amounts various debtors owed his master. R. Alan Culpepper outlines three possibilities. He could be simply cheating his master by cutting the debts, or

he could be removing the interest assigned to the debts, or removing his own cut of the profits. Whatever he's doing, Jesus says, "his master commended [him] 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 the light." And we can argue, and scholars do, if that last part was original or the attempts of later interpreters to make sense of this weird parable, but the commendation of the master toward the dishonest manager is certainly Jesus' conclusion to the parable. Recognizing that the amounts in question here, a hundred jugs of olive oil and a hundred containers of wheat, are astronomical amounts, much more than a normal household, values equal to that of a modern-day corporation, doesn't really make it clearer. Is Jesus telling us it's ok to cheat our employer as long as that employer makes a lot of profit? Is that the takeaway here? What do we do with this parable.

Before we come to that, let's talk a little bit about Jesus and money. Because Jesus has more to say about money than he had to say about any other topic. More than heaven and hell, more than salvation, more than any social issue of any sort, Jesus wanted to talk about wealth. Who had it, how it was managed, and who controlled it, or who it controlled. I think Jesus talked about money so much because money is hard to talk about. It's essential, we need money to live, the disciples needed money to carry out their mission, but it's also super simple for money to become the goal rather than the means to the goal. That's really what that last line of the lesson, you cannot serve God and wealth, is getting at. It's all too easy for money to become an idol.

Two weeks ago, when we read the passage about the cost of discipleship, there was a line in there that I've been thinking about ever since. It didn't fit into that sermon, so I left it out, but I think it plays into this one. It's the verse where Jesus said, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all of your possessions." Did Jesus literally mean we are supposed to give away all our possessions? I actually think the answer to that question is no, I think Jesus is actually calling us to something that is, in its own way, much harder. To keep our possessions but to not see them as ours anymore, instead viewing them as tools we have for building the kingdom of God. What do I mean by that? I'm a checklist person. I love clear instructions and guidelines. If I knew the key to pleasing God was giving away everything I have, that would be hard. Not going to lie. It would be hard and scary to give away everything and fully rely on God's providence. It would be hard, but I could figure out how to do it. There would be a clear end point when I no longer had any stuff where I could sit back, rest on my laurels, and knew I'd done all that God asked of me.

Instead, I think what Jesus means by giving away all our possessions is giving away thinking about our possessions as ours, and instead thinking about them as tools for work in the kingdom, as things that belong to God which we are stewards of for a time. This is mentally a harder thing because it forces us again and again to reevaluate how we are using these things we have for God's kingdom. It means constantly having to check myself, are the ways I'm spending my money helping promote God's work in the world, or mine?

This brings us back around to our parable for this morning. The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly. Prudently is another translation, he used the tool of his position to accomplish what he wanted. And if he, who, the text later hints, is a child of the world, could be so effective in reaching his selfish purpose, think what the people of God accomplish if they were so shrewd in managing all that God has given them.

Because here's the thing about money, people of God, it's in the world. You can't ignore it. You have to deal with it. The disciples were going to find themselves in control over a lot of money as the Jesus movement grew and more and more people came, bringing with them their stuff. This parable is getting the disciples ready to think about how they are going to use money, because Jesus knew if they didn't think about how they would use it, it would use them. And this parable is hard, because figuring out how to use money well is hard. There are a million different variables, people will have different thoughts or opinions, different goals and values. Goals and values that can both be good and still be conflicting.

Most of you know I've been serving on the budget and finance committee for the ELCA for the past three years. This means I've seen our own denomination deal with some of these conflicting interests as we try to best be God's people. Here's a really interesting case study for you. Should the ELCA divest from certain companies, companies that support fossil fuels for example, or weapons, or that take stands against church teachings, in church sponsored retirement accounts? On one hand, do we have a moral obligation to not support such companies? But on the other hand, do we have an obligation to the families who are counting on that retirement to make sure they have the resources they need? The

decision the ELCA has come to, and you can argue about the wisdom of this decision, and trust me, budget and finance does ALL THE TIME, is to keep investing in some companies, not all, but some, whose values disagree with our own, because being an investor means keeping a seat at the table and being able to advocate for different practices. Because the reality is the ELCA retirement investments are a lot, but in the grand scheme of retirement accounts, not that much. Were we to pull all the money, these companies would be affected, but they'd get over it. But staying invested means the ELCA stays at the table. There have been some examples of companies making changes to their practices because of the advocacy of religious groups who are invested with them. You might disagree with how the ELCA is approaching this. I don't always agree with it, and I sit on the committee that makes those decisions. But what I've learned from that work, what it's helping me to do in my own life and in our life as a congregation, is to ask a lot of questions, to try to think through all the possibilities. To recognize that there isn't always, or ever, an easy or right answer to complicated questions. We weigh the options, make the best decisions we can, keeping our ultimate goal in mind, spreading the kingdom of God.

I wish I could tie all this sermon up in a bow and give you a nice, here's how to do this, message for you. This parable doesn't give us that gift. And that, I think itself is a gift. Because with this parable, Jesus is acknowledging for the disciples that the world is complicated. There aren't easy answers. What there is, is a God who is with us in the challenges. Who is willing to walk alongside us as we struggle, and wrestle, figure things out, mess things up, and try again. So be bold, take risks, and do your best. That is, in the end, all God asks of us. Amen.