

Sermon on Luke 16:1-13
15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 22, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today's gospel passage is one that pastors hate to preach on. Adolf Rucker called it "the problem child of parable exegesis". Why do I say this? Because it is so hard to find the good news in it, and we have been trained to preach the gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ. It's a reflex with us. So how do you extract good news from a parable Jesus told about a dishonest manager who has been siphoning off funds from the debts of his boss's business clients, gets caught, then goes behind his boss's back to get them to pay up at a 50% rate, then pays his boss back at a much reduced amount – and his boss praises him for his shrewdness!!!! It sounds more like a front page story from today's national news! I don't know about you, but I didn't learn this gospel in Sunday School! How could Jesus praise "shrewdness" that sounds more like dishonesty! He gave a great deal to his boss's creditors, in effect cheating his boss out of half of his money, which is more like a chapter 11 bankruptcy deal than making "good" on a debt! But the rich man was happy. There is nothing here about business ethics 101 – it sounds more like the lack of ethics by some of our nation's present cabinet secretaries in the White House! So what gives? Where is the good news? This requires a deep dive into the good news dumpster!

So when you don't know what to do, where are you going to go? Who are you going to call? Ghostbusters? My local clergy colleagues in our weekly text study couldn't help me – they were just as lost as I was. Well, I went online to workingpreacher.com, hosted by Luther Seminary, and I found help in the writings of New Testament professor Matt Skinner. He said that some of the best sermons and writings come from scripture passages that confuse us or make us the most mad! Not from the comforting passages that are so familiar that they don't challenge our imagination. But passages that make us work and dig deep, they challenge us to ask "where is the good news in this?" And when we find it, there is great joy in heaven and in our hearts! Hard lessons from scripture make us better preachers and listeners – because you can't fall asleep when you are wondering how in the hell this manager will get out of the problem he has dug for himself! For he is not strong enough to dig ditches for a living, and too proud to beg! (I can relate to this, can you?!) I don't want to stand on the corner with a sign saying "I need help. God bless." Right? Hard lessons give us permission to be creative, to think "outside the box", and perceive our reality of financial debt and moral failings in a different way! Good news today has to be new and improved from the gospel we once heard in Sunday School, that distant memory! I now have God's

permission to be bold and outrageous, even absurd, a troublemaker in Jesus' name! Because what else are you going to do with this text? Where is the life in it?

So what did the devious manager do when he was found out, and had to think of something fast to save his life? He was desperate, and devised a very shrewd plan, using all his devious skills. He offered all of his boss's creditors an easier way out, a discounted payment plan which, if they paid up front, would save them half of what they owed! Wouldn't you go for an offer that cut your mortgage in half? It was brilliant! And he did not go to business school! When all seemed lost, he figured out a business plan that saved his life, and those who were also in debt! He gave new life to all those who were indebted to "the man", by forgiving their debt at a greatly discounted cost! He made business partners out of his boss's debtors! He even impressed his boss while cooking the books! Good news for all!

As a privileged American, who has never had to figure out how to survive – only how to achieve more and get ahead – I have never been that desperate. I don't find good news in bad examples of dishonesty or someone who has to steal or do whatever it takes to feed your family. We have our own ethics which come from privilege. Not that they are "bad" ethics – they are good – for us! But many of us cannot relate to someone who is in danger of losing all that they have – their home, their job, their family, all that they've been living for. But many of our neighbors do – and the number increases every year. There are so many families, single adults and youth who are homeless, who cannot afford to even rent an apartment or find a room, because there is a drastic shortage of affordable housing in St. Paul. In fact, for someone earning \$30,000 or less in a year today, there is no housing left! Surviving on the street requires a different set of ethics.

I learned from my wife what it means to lose everything when she had to leave Cambodia as a refugee, because of an evil Khmer Rouge regime and war. We see it every day in the migrants who cross our southern border in search of a better life in America and a future for their children, but end up in immigration court. You can see them yourself at the Whipple Building at Fort Snelling, shackled and wearing orange jump suits, for daring to come to America. Didn't they know we were "full"? We see it in the experience of asylum seekers who flee violence in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, and risk everything – even detention and separation from their children – to come to America. We see it in the refugees who are on the move across the world, especially from Africa and the Middle East, who have to leave their homelands because of war, poverty, famine or drought from climate change, and risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean in leaking, overcrowded boats to seek new life in Europe – whoever will take them in. I saw some of them two years ago when I visited relatives in Lund, Sweden – where my grandparents came from 100 years ago - refugees from Romania begging on street corners, hoping to survive in old Europe which sent so many

immigrants to America long ago! Like our own immigrant ancestors, they are forced to leave their homes and loved ones to seek a new life in a strange land. No one does this unless they have to. 99% of human beings would rather stay in their ancestral home, if they have safety for their families, sufficient food and shelter, and a future. But when you are desperate, you leave. Or when you are faced with losing everything, or your children are threatened, you do desperate things, sometimes things that you wouldn't do if you had "enough", to survive. Like the manager in today's gospel – who maybe had been dishonest, or maybe he had been inept in business, but once he was up against survival – being fired or put in prison – he showed great ingenuity and shrewdness. He not only survived, he was praised and promoted! Well done, good and faithful (dishonest) servant! And today you and I read his story in church! God does have a sense of humor!

One thing I learn from this text is that all your (and my) assumptions about money and debt are RUBBISH – in regards to God. They may be true on earth, with other humans, fallen and greedy and judgmental as we are! On earth a debt is a debt, and you can go to prison for it – or just for the color of your skin or your religion. People argue over TRASH in St. Paul! But your debts to God? Jesus will pay them all for you. He already has suffered on the cross. But God has already forgiven you, because God is merciful and full of compassion. And so you cannot serve two masters: it's either God or money!

So here is the lesson, that gives us all good news: We are all in debt (to sin), and nobody can repay God this debt. That's what Jesus came to do! So, what do we do about our debt to sin? What can we do when we cannot repay our debt in full or cheat death? (For we admit that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves!) Or when we are powerless over addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling or sex, and we need a higher power! We place our trust in Jesus, who has already paid the debt, and put our lives in God's hands. God has offered us the free gift of life – mercy and forgiveness – by sending Jesus to live among us, to die for us, and raised him again to life, to lead us all to life forever through faith in him. So believe in him, follow Jesus, and you will live! You will also need a community of faith – fellow debtors – to support you and walk with you! You'll need a support group or a church – or both!!

I had an "ah-ha" moment as I thought of this text in relation to this church. As you know, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer has a financial debt – over \$100,000 in a mortgage on our roof, which originally was over \$300,000. We have not been dishonest in this, but we have had a budget shortfall every year that I have been here (that's 25 years, so this is nothing new!). We have always been in debt; it is our human condition! We cannot pay our way out of this debt in a year or in a decade. We do not have enough people, for as church numbers slowly decline, our expenses slowly go up. It's called inflation! So we have delayed

some payments over the years, and used up our reserves. This is what our human devices call us to do, and the well is running dry. There are no more accounting tricks, no rich estates to save us. We know this. So now has come the time to think differently.

We could give up in despair, make plans to close and walk away. This is what the manager in the parable thought about, but he was not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg. We, on the other hand, don't have enough resources to pay all our debts, and we are too faithful to close the church! We still have a mission from God! So what are we to do? What if we used our imaginations, our God-given creativity, and shrewdly thought of a plan to move Redeemer into the future? We have too much important ministry to do, we have hundreds of human beings who do the work of having their lives transformed here – be it Narcotics Anonymous groups, Youth Works, Project Home, Protect Minnesota from gun violence, ISALAH community organizing, ministry with seniors, sanctuary for immigrants, Sunday worship and choir rehearsal. We have too much of God's work to do with our hands, so what shall we do to resolve our debts and reach financial stability? It seems absurd, but I think it requires us to form a common bond with people who are also in debt, addicted, homeless and desperate! For who else would have us? We don't have to be dishonest or win the lottery! But we can be shrewd, like the manager! We can be as smart as foxes and innocent as doves and do God's work! That's Christ's call to us!

So some of your brothers and sisters are thinking of ways to rethink how we structure our finances and our physical properties, so that we can continue our vital ministries of worship, pastoral care, working for justice and community engagement. Surely we can find a way to remain the Church, continue our community ministries that are life-saving to many people, and be financially viable! We may have to rethink everything in a new way, give up some ownership and become partners with our neighbors and the people who depend on this place. I don't know what it will look like in the end, but there are people in this congregation who are thinking hard about this. I invite your ideas as well! Let's be bold and outrageous – maybe even “fools for Christ!” That's biblical!

Because we are not rich, or strong enough to dig ourselves out of this, and we are too proud to beg, perhaps. But Lutherans are stubborn until the day we die! It may be hard to change the Church, but it's even harder to kill it! The church keeps on rising from the dead (that's biblical, too)! We don't want to give up our ministry, because we have been called. **AND I AM NOT RETIRING, BY THE WAY, SO YOU CAN STOP SPECULATING ABOUT THAT NOW.** So if we have been called, let's not only use our hands and our feet to do God's work, not only our voices and our hearts in love of God and neighbor. Let's also use our minds, our training and education that we received in school and our experience,

along with the imagination of the Holy Spirit, and let's figure it out! Surely we can match the example of this shrewd, devious manager of scripture, because we are Lutherans! We follow Jesus, who taught us this parable, after all! Then Jesus will praise us for our faith, because we have used all of our bodies, our faith, our hearts, and our minds, to serve God and neighbor, as disciples of Jesus our Lord! Thanks be to God! Amen.