

Sermon on Luke 16:1-13
18th Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Ok, you've got to admit, last Sunday's gospel lesson was much better than this! Last Sunday we heard Jesus tell two parables about a shepherd who went searching and found a sheep that had been lost, and a woman who searched everywhere for a silver coin that she had lost. We could relate to their great joy in finding valuable possessions which they had lost – which Jesus compared to the great joy God has whenever one sinner repents, and comes home. Isn't that what the good news is all about? We like those kinds of stories! And the story in Luke which follows right after these two parables is the Parable of the Lost Sons (and the Welcoming Father). The father was so happy to see his lost son come home that he held a great party for him, and killed the fatted calf (much to the displeasure of his older son, who stayed out in the field to pout). Anyway, we love this story, because it assures us that God will welcome you and me home whatever we have done, no matter how far away we run – when we repent and return, all is forgiven, and we can all live happily ever after. That's how we like it to be, in Church!

But then we have this story today. A dishonest manager is caught in the act by his wealthy employer for “cooking the books” and squandering his property. The manager is going to get fired, and he knows his goose is cooked. He doesn't have any other skills, and he's afraid he's going to starve (“I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm too proud to beg!”) So, what does he do? He saved his own neck with “other people's money”! He devised a plan to get other people to owe him something, just in case he was fired and left without a place to eat or sleep. He cut a deal with everyone who owed his employer money: if someone owed him a hundred jugs of oil, he only charged him for fifty. If someone owed 100 containers of wheat, he said “make it 80”. What a brilliant scheme! Everybody came out ahead: the creditors who paid only half of what they owed, and the employer, too – he didn't lose everything. And most of all, the dishonest manager survived! His employer praised him for being so shrewd, and not losing the whole business – he had made his dishonesty work for him at last! Everyone was happy – but it was a different kind of joy than that which we heard about last week when “the lost had been found”. Today it's more like relief – because the business was not lost, and the dishonest manager lived to see another day!

So what was Jesus' point? It seems like a negative one: he praises the manager, even as he is dishonest, for acting shrewdly – for using his wits *even dishonestly* – to get himself out of the trouble that his dishonesty had gotten him into. Because he was able, by his wits, to build relationships that would save him

in the end. This is like the *un-parable*. It almost sounds like “the ends justifies the means” – which is not biblical, by the way! Was Jesus smiling as he said this, at the irony of it all? The closest thing he ever said like this before was to his disciples, when he warned them to be “*as wise as serpents, and as innocent as doves.*” Although there was nothing innocent about what the dishonest manager did, cheating his employer to get out of trouble – which was a brilliant strategy, even as it was unethical. So this whole story is troubling to us, because it is so difficult to understand how this is “good news!”

But maybe, just maybe, the point is resolved in the next paragraph, when Jesus said “*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.*” In other words, the little things are just as important as the big things when it comes to being honest. Because, if you cheat with the small stuff, you will likely also cheat when people’s lives are on the line.

It’s like when you talk about parenting. Experts say that the best way to build trust with your children is to begin when they are babies, feeding and changing them when they cry, so they trust that you will always be there. Pay attention to them as they grow up, and their questions that seem so small then, so that when they are older they will come to you for the big stuff – the issues that are truly important. You want them to trust you then, I assure you!

And finally, Jesus gets to his ultimate point, which is one of the great truths in life: “*No one can serve two masters – for you will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*” So was that whole story of the dishonest manager all a set up, building up to this great truth? Maybe it’s not really about the dishonest manager at all – except where it applies to us in our brokenness – and more about God, who can be seen in the welcoming father in the parable of the Lost Sons, and in the employer who didn’t condemn the dishonest manger, but praised him for using his wits and making things right!

This God is the one who cancels our debts and forgives our faults, our brokenness, even our dishonesty and fraud! This amazing, surprising, unexpected God reaches out to us when we have run the farthest away, and lived contrary to God’s desire. This God forgives when we humans would condemn; forgiving even the son who runs away from home to sow his wild oats and live apart, giving him a PARTY, and cancels the debts in full that we in our incompetence and failures cannot pay – or even the ones that we scheme to have forgiven.

So how does this prodigal, wildly lavish forgiveness of God work out in our lives today, and how do we respond, as we come to our senses and realize our need for God’s forgiveness? Let me begin with a story.

In this story from over 150 years ago, we see how God's people are inspired to pay off a debt in a very different way, to set a slave free. A graduate student named Suzanna Krivulskaya researched it. It was a Sunday morning in June, 1856 (before the Civil War), and the Brooklyn Plymouth congregation's worship was coming to a close. The pastor, famed abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher had preached on the gospel from Luke, when Jesus asked, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good, or do evil? To save life, or destroy it?" The congregation expected to sing a closing hymn and go back home for dinner. Instead, Beecher announced that he had been contacted by a slave trader in Richmond about a young woman, a mixed-race slave named Sarah, whose own father had traded her in for cash. She had been born from a sexual assault on her mother, a black slave, and her sale made her white "father" \$1200 richer. Her story was so tragic that even the slave trader was moved – to ask Reverend Beecher to help buy her freedom.

So Beecher brought Sarah forward, to stand in front of the church, and to a stunned church, told them the story. He announced that they would have a "fundraiser" today – an "auction" to buy Sarah's freedom. "Who bids on her freedom?" he asked. In tears, one by one the parishioners came forward with their offerings – if they had no cash, some gave their jewelry. With \$783 cash and the precious stones, they raised enough to purchase Sarah's freedom that Sabbath day – and that of her own 2-year-old son. The awful tradition of slave auctions in the South had been turned upside down in this Brooklyn church, into an offering that purchased a slave's freedom. There would be a lot more suffering – and a great Civil War – to come, but at last people of faith began to use their financial gifts to good purpose for the sake of the gospel. Beecher's congregation burst out in applause – "thank God almighty, she is free at last!" – and sang a joyful hymn.

Today we have continued as a people to increase our debts – not only with credit cards and payday loans, but also by our increasing debt of injustice in our communities, nation and world. We have so often squandered our gift of freedom in the gospel, neglected our worship and the principles of justice that Jesus proclaimed in the good news. When we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves, when we neglect vulnerable widows and leave children in poverty, our debt of sin increases. We confess these sins every Sunday morning and hear God's forgiveness proclaimed again and again in the pastor's words of absolution.

But there comes a time when each of us needs to "wake up" and realize that the squandering of our freedom and our failure to ensure economic and racial justice in our land has left us all vulnerable and under judgment. We as a society have failed to guarantee freedom and opportunity to all of our citizens, particularly African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans – leaving many in poverty, without adequate education or job skills, or in prison. Many are stuck in deeper debt, due to payday lending, exorbitant interest rates, and health care costs.

This is why we have worked so hard in Isaiah this past year to pass the Earned Sick and Safe Time ordinance in St. Paul, and continue to work on Paid Family Leave legislation at the Minnesota Legislature. It's a small price to pay in order to "pay off" the greater debt that illness can cause, to avoid getting fired because you, or a family member, are sick. This is why we join strikers marching for an increase in minimum wage – from a lowly \$7.25 to ultimately \$15 an hour, so that people can live on what they earn! Some of us also are working to get our legislature and Congress to make it against the law to charge 300% interest on a payday loan, and cap them off at a mere 37%! Otherwise, we are only allowing payday lenders to engage in loan-sharking. Don't you think that people of faith should be concerned about this, if we profess to love our neighbors? When the costs of living – food, shelter, transportation and health care – are so expensive these days, it is a moral failure that 165,000 children live in poverty in our own state of Minnesota, one of our most progressive states – "the best place to live" some say (if you are white). 40% of African American children in Minnesota live in poverty; and just 7% of white children. We are even willing to risk the drinking water of present and future generations for pipelines pumping oil from North Dakota across the Missouri near Standing Rock Reservation, where natives live in poverty but only the owners of oil companies get rich!

Jesus said, "*Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much...no one can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and wealth.*"

We have watched brand new stadiums go up in our own Twin Cities community – from Target Field, to the \$1 billion dollar US Bank Stadium, and in the near future, a new soccer stadium just a couple miles down the road in St. Paul. If you wonder if there are "other gods" in Minnesota that we worship, go hang out for a few hours this afternoon or evening outside the U.S. Bank stadium when the Minnesota Vikings play the Green Bay Packers in a football game. The King James Version of the bible translated the word for wealth as "Mammon" – which was the ancient god of riches, worshiped as an idol. Jesus said very clearly that we cannot love our neighbor in need while at the same time worship this god of wealth and property. If racism is the original sin of America, then economic injustice is the evil twin brother who makes many people suffer unjustly, because of the color of their skin and lack of opportunity. The prophet Amos had words for those "*that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land!*"

But lest we leave in despair, Jesus offers you and me a better way, through faith. Jesus calls us all to "follow me" – to leave that false master and wayward road seeking wealth and prosperity, and follow him instead on the one true path. For he has already paid our debt to sin, on the cross, and offers you and me and all the world *life everlasting*. It is the life that equates love of God with love of self and love for neighbor, where we discover that when we share, all are lifted up.