

## **SERMON – TRINITY 14 (Luke 16.1-13)**

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The lectionary passages today are from the book of Amos and the gospel of Luke. These scripture readings as well as the lectionary Psalm contain a theme that is strong in the Bible – the theme that God is the God of the poor, that he takes a special interest in the poor and the oppressed.

The parable in today's gospel passage is a real head-scratcher. It's one of the most puzzling teachings of Jesus. We have a business manager who engages in questionable conduct that damages his boss financially and yet wins his praise. Really?

The parable begins by introducing a rich man who has a steward who managed his business affairs. But all is not well. The steward is accused of mismanagement. What his mismanagement is about is unclear, but we are told that he squandered his master's wealth.

Several of the parables in the gospel of Luke share similar key words and are thematically linked. For example, Jesus used the word "squandered" when he described the wealth-dissipating conduct of the prodigal son in chapter 15. And now in chapter 16, we have the dishonest manager "squandering" his master's wealth. When his master hears about this, he fires the manager and demands of that he hand over all his financial records.

Jesus continues with his parable by describing the manager's response to the crisis that he faces. We read an interior monologue articulating the man's dilemma. We hear questions that invite Jesus' listeners into the story, inviting them to contemplate how they would respond in such a situation. "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". Self-

awareness catalyses a rapidly developing strategy, a strategy designed to win the manager friends whose welcome would ensure his survival.

One by one, the manager renegotiates the contracts of his former boss's debtors. He substantially reduces the amounts they owe. The scale of the debts – “a hundred jugs of olive oil” and “a hundred containers of wheat” – the scale indicates that the debtors have much to gain from such a renegotiation, and that they must have been very grateful. They may not have been aware of the manager's release from employment. They could have assumed that the debt reduction has been authorized by their wealthy creditor, though the instruction to rewrite the contract “quickly” may seem curious.

It's normal to regard the steward's conduct as dishonest. After all, Jesus, the narrator of the parable, calls him a dishonest manager. Some commentators of this text have attempted to defend his character. They suggest that by reducing the contracted debts at the expense of his master, he is not acting as a scoundrel but instead performing a virtuous act, either removing unlawful interest built into the debt principal or voluntarily forfeiting his own agent's commission. But the story doesn't highlight his virtue. Rather it turns on his shrewdness in surviving a desperate situation. And his strategy results in more of the wealth-squandering that cost him his job in the first place.

It's a strange story, and Jesus' sayings that follow frame the parable by making it clear that the master's praise does not mean that dishonest conduct is acceptable. Rather, all are urged to be utterly trustworthy in handling the affairs and resources entrusted to them. Yet, in commenting on the parable, Jesus laments that the children of light, the people of God, don't seem to be as savvy as others who are driven by self-interest, as is the steward in parable. Still, in a strange way, the parable points in a promising direction – money may and often does entangle and corrupt, but it can also be a vehicle for forging relationships of value, where it is not about self-interest but about contributing to the flourishing of others.

I mentioned earlier about sections in the gospel of Luke that are thematically linked. As we read through this gospel, we sense Luke's insistent appeal for generous sharing of wealth with the poor. He does so by his inclusion of parables and teachings told by Jesus. There is the parable of the rich fool in chapter 12 who pulled down his barns and built larger ones to store his grain and goods, and with satisfaction said to himself, "My soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry." Jesus relates God's response to the man, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" And Jesus concludes the parable with these words, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

A bit later in chapter 12, Luke records Jesus' instructions to his disciples, "Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Both the parable and the teaching urge people to show love for God by showing generosity towards others.

Jesus invokes the biblical concept of Jubilee and debt forgiveness. At the very beginning of his ministry, when he was in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus announced, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Economic restitution is also part of the joy of Mary's Magnificat. She says, "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." And later, the joy of the gospel is proclaimed to tax collectors like Zacchaeus. When Zacchaeus restores four-fold what he had defrauded, he is restored to the community, when Jesus proclaims to him, "Today salvation has come to this house." All these events and sayings are recorded by Luke.

After the parable about the dishonest manager comes another about the rich man and the sick beggar, Lazarus, depicting the dramatic reversal of fortunes for wealthy and destitute.

And between the two parables, Luke places a set of enigmatic sayings of Jesus that connect the realm of God with the strong claims of the law and the prophets. An example is found in today's Old Testament reading, which records Amos speaking forth God's condemnation against the those who trample on the poor and cause them suffering.

The Jewish law forbade the charging of interest on loans because it exploited the vulnerable poor, a command repeated in Exodus chapter 22, Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 and 23. In the Lord's Prayer we request the Father to "Forgive us our debts." Yet, in today's parable we encounter a debt collector who actually forgives and reduces poor people's debts by 20 to 50 percent, and our first instincts are to judge him, to be suspicious of him.

It's hard to know how Jesus wants us to judge any of the characters in this parable, including the dishonest manager whose job included debt-collecting. In Roman-occupied Galilee in the first century, rich landlords and rulers were loan-sharks, charging exorbitant, unpayable fees to amass more land by disinheritng peasants of their family land. That was in direct violation of biblical covenantal law. The rich man in our parable and his manager were both exploiting desperate, illiterate peasants. Wealthy landlords in Jesus' day often hid interest by rolling it into the principal. Hidden interest rates reached 26 percent for money and 50 percent for goods. The manipulative steward was probably extracting his own cut of the profits on top of the 50 percent layer for the landlord, and the additional tax charged by Rome. Very likely, the manager's offers to the debtors involved reducing their debts to the original amount borrowed, without hidden commissions, fees and interest charges, which the law forbade.

Today's analogies could include high-interest student loans, predatory pay-day loans, or harsh austerity measures imposed on countries whose citizens had no role in agreeing to any debts. The Lutheran World Federation once labelled the oppressive debt terms imposed on Honduras and other Latin American countries as "illegitimate debts" and likened such

debt itself to “violence” because of its crushing effects on people’s futures. A spokesperson for the LWF even referred to the debt system as “modern slavery.”

The challenge in this parable is knowing where Jesus wants us to side. There are many interpretative possibilities to this parable, and each raises questions.

In the sayings that follow the parable, three times Jesus personifies wealth, using the word “Mammon” to warn about the danger wealth poses as a god or an idol (vv. 11, 13). The same adjective “dishonest”, which is also translated “unrighteous”, is used to describe both the steward and Mammon. The idea of using unrighteous Mammon to achieve everlasting dwellings is hard to fathom – unless the idea may be to use the master’s tools, unrighteous Mammon, to dismantle the master’s house, the unjust debt structure. The master’s word of commendation for the steward is sometimes translated ‘shrewd’ (v. 8) which also means “prudent” or “wise.”

Recent translations of Luke 16 have shifted away from “Mammon” in the King James Version to “wealth” in the New Revised Standard Version, or “worldly wealth” in the Common English Bible. But perhaps we need to retain the personified name of the idol Mammon, as a reminder of how love of money, greed and exploitation can function as an idol or even a religion. Our current global financial system is structured around debt and exploitation of poor people through debt. Yet people treat acquisition of money almost as an article of faith.

Jesus invites us to practise neighbourly love in economic relationships, in the midst of unjust structures. He repeatedly warns that we cannot be disciples while accumulating wealth at the expense of the poor. We can situate this parable in the broader economic context of how Jesus was reviving biblical covenantal economic life, forgiving sins and debts and giving people new hope. In Luke, the joy of the Gospel is the joy of God’s healing of relationships, including economic relationships.

Jesus states that we can't serve both God and wealth. Yet the parable and the subsequent sayings suggest that we can serve God by being strategic and wise, by being faithful in how we deal with the economic resources at our disposal. The enormous disparity in wealth between the rich and most others in many parts of the world today highlights the importance of working for the adoption of more just systems. Jesus picks up that thread more directly in the next parable about the rich man and Lazarus. Do read that parable at home because next week, we will not be continuing with Luke 16 as we will be celebrating Harvest and looking at a reading from the gospel of John.