

Proper 20 – 17 Pentecost – Year C – September 19, 2010
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79: 1-9; 1 Timothy 2: 1-7; Luke 16:1-13
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Quote. “O wretched slaves of Mammon, you cannot glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ while you trust in treasures laid up on earth: you cannot taste and see how gracious the Lord is, while you are hungering for gold.” Unquote. So says Bernard of Clairvaux in his treatise *On Loving God*. Well that sounds like a scolding! I’m sure none of us appreciates being told what to think or do about money. These days, even talking about money is one of those conversational gray areas, bordering on impolite, or verging on downright nosy. Having said that, there’s no getting around it, this parable is not an allegory it is about money. It tells the story of a cheat. In its stark honesty, it also indicts a social order that promotes the personal accumulation of wealth for wealth’s sake. This parable is truly alive and well today. It has a voice, spoken with a hint of cynicism, in the old adage: the rich get rich, and the poor get poorer. Yet, as we are about to discover, this is also the Gospel, the Good News of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. At its heart, this story generates another type of ‘big bang’, and the creation of a new kingdom. On the one hand, there’s the pervasive cultural worldview, and on the other hand, there is God’s economy, God’s community, and the way of God’s kingdom.

This parable is meant to make us sit up and take notice. What were you thinking and feeling when you heard this Gospel story? Did a little part of you admire the smooth move the manager pulled off, and wonder if you might not have done the same thing in his position? Were you thinking about your credit card bill and wishing someone would make a generous clerical error that took off a zero or two? Maybe you had a sort of rueful feeling that some folks have all the luck. Or did you put yourself squarely on the side of honesty and wonder about the injustice of good things happening to bad people? What about all of the above?

So what’s going on in this parable, in both its original context, and our own? Those who first heard this story would recognize a man of substantial social status, responsible for managing the affairs of an extremely wealthy master. They would not be surprised that the manager is a crook. From the rich master’s perspective, having a cheating manager was pretty much the norm of the day, and just another cost of doing business. So no surprises yet! With the social networking system commonly called patronage in full swing, doing favors for others was also expected. A wealthy patron gives money, or does favors for select clients with the uncontested expectation that the client is then in their debt. The patron-client relationship is reciprocal, but based on inequality, driven by economic power and the desire for status and honor. Today, it encompasses everything from the well-known glass ceiling, to euphemisms like “I’ll scratch your back, if you’ll scratch mine”, or even our *alma mater* networks, especially for those of us who want to climb or maintain a position on that most fabled social ladder.

The crafty manager has considerable social status, and he fully intends to keep it that way, so he works out a scheme to ensure that he actually becomes a kind of patron to a whole bunch of clients, his master’s debtors in fact. By forgiving debts owed to his master, the manager is confident that his new clients will want to repay him in kind. No one hearing this story as Jesus told it would have been at all surprised. Even in first century Palestine, the rich most definitely got richer, and the poor -- well the poor lived lives that were indescribably hard. Their struggles were mostly beyond our experiences. We see glimpses of abject poverty from faraway lands on the evening news, or read about it in books like Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, but very few of us know about the kind of extreme poverty that was widespread in Jesus’ lifetime. For those in positions of power today, perhaps the closest modern equivalent to the dishonest manager’s scheme, is a corporate executive’s ‘Golden Parachute’. Guaranteed to provide a gentle landing, a ‘Golden Parachute’ is monetary, stock and share options that an executive receives on exiting a corporation. It is usually contractual and available irrespective of the circumstances of his or her departure. So far, both then and now, we’ve heard nothing that really surprises us. All this is just a reasonably accurate description of how the world

works, whether we like it or not.

Then from the reading, we hear these words: "... his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." Now that jolts us. In the role of master, can Jesus really be commending the dishonest manager for his cheating ways? The answer is a qualified no. As Biblical scholar Luise Schottroff provides, Jesus commends the cheating manager because he is unwittingly modeling a way of life that the Christian community can also use to further God's kingdom. To be clear, cheating and unethical behavior is not what Jesus is commending to us. For us to understand the parable and its modern-day implications, we need to look at the way of life that the manager has modeled so effectively, albeit in an unethical form.

The manager in the parable uses money to build relationships. In his case, the relationships are based on the system of patronage, and he fully expects a risk free and guaranteed return on his investment. Jesus is also commending Christians to use money to build relationships, but hold on a minute that sounds distinctly dodgy. When we get to the specifics, what Jesus *is* encouraging in His disciples is to use money to make friends. Jesus' teaching relies on a distinct understanding of what friendship is, and is not. For example, unlike patronage, friendship does not rely on reciprocity. Friendship is a relationship built on giving with no expectation of return. Think about it. How do our own friendships measure up to Jesus' definition? Do we harbor expectations of those we call our friends? Do we give and share with others without any thought or anticipation of return, and then count these people amongst our friends?

We have heard plenty about how the world works. Yet the other world that Luke is describing is one that practices the presence of God's kingdom here and now. Living into God's kingdom means embracing a new paradigm, quite contrary to the normal ways of a dog-eat-dog world. In fact, as we know from the earliest Christian community described in the Book of Acts, living out the radical hospitality of God's kingdom is highly counter cultural. They shared their resources with such hospitality and generosity that every member of the community had enough to eat, clothes to wear, and somewhere to live. The structure of our lives has changed a lot, and yet we still have the same opportunities to ensure that those who have little or nothing are fed, clothed and have shelter. We already give and share in many ways here at Our Saviour. Any one of us here today can make new friends in simple ways like signing up to volunteer at the Love Kitchen, at a local thrift store, or at the hospital. We can extend our web of friends by making a financial pledge to this community of faith. All over the country today, individuals from communities just like ours heard this parable. Imagine how the world could be different if we all used our wealth of blessings to make just one new friend today. What a difference we can each make if we share with someone who won't be giving us anything in return any time soon.

Like the words of Bernard, this parable demands a response. We are not being told to sell everything we own and live on the street. But we should know that we can make a difference one friend at a time. God is inviting us to make new friends through our commitment to offer a helping hand to someone in need. Sharing holy hospitality is how we transform the world in Christ's name. To respect the dignity of everyone we meet without discrimination, to use our wealth of talents, is to make friends in a new way. God's love and grace are amazing and abundant, yet this parable is still shared today, because it is still calling us to take notice and give our own answer. God cares deeply about what we choose to do. As the closing lines of the story tell us, in the extravagance of God's grace, when we are faithful in the little things of life, God will bless us with great riches. Bernard says, when we trust in God, each one of us will taste and see God's greatest treasures: love and friendship; kindness and generosity; mercy and peace.

Amen.