

11/6/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Dear God, as the words of the song just reminded us, you have made all things – things visible and invisible. You created this planet and everything on it. We are amazed and grateful as we watch the season turn, and witness the beauty of the skies. Thank you God, for the recent rains here in this area that have nourished the parched earth. We pray for those who live in places where recent weather conditions have brought destruction and grief. For those in Texas and Oklahoma where tornados wreaked havoc. For those in coastal regions who will deal with the damage of flooding for months to come. For those around the globe who are suffering drought and famine. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers. We pray for those who are beginning meetings today at the global conference on climate change in Egypt. Be present there with your Spirit of compassion and collaboration. Give wisdom and willingness to bring bold solutions. And may the people of the world come together in love and concern for this planet – our home.

O God, as elections are happening in our own country this week, we pray for your peace and calm to prevail. May the fruits of your Holy Spirit be made visible by those who faithfully follow your son Jesus.

God, we thank you for this opportunity to be here this morning, to come together for fellowship, for worship, to learn about you and strengthen our faith as we try to follow Jesus. We come with all sorts of distractions and worries that can keep us from focusing on you, Lord. Help us to rest in the assurance of your love and care. Thank you for celebrations and occasions that mark time and offer reasons to reflect on your steadfast love. For birthdays, weddings, anniversaries and other rites of passage that give us opportunities to be thankful.

And just as you are with us through these times of celebration, you are just as present in times of grief, illness and difficulty, and again – we are grateful. We offer our prayers for those we know are struggling and for those whose struggles we do not know, but you know. Thank you for healing that has come for Steve, for the doctors who continue to offer their training and education for Steve's well-being. We ask for further healing and recovery for Steve and for continued faithfulness and patience for him and Sandy and their family. Thank you for successful surgery and for difficult progress that has been made for Norman this past week. We pray for continued patience and strength for Norman and for Leona. We pray now in these moments of silence for those whose needs are on our hearts and minds...

We pray together the prayer that Jesus taught us – Our Father, who art in heaven...

THE PROBLEM OF MAMMON – PASTOR CALEB

Luke 16:1-13

Did Jesus just praise someone for lying and cheating? Did I hear that right?

I think maybe it has something to do with money... I mean Jesus goes on to say that we can't serve both God and money.

I'm not the first person to be a little puzzled. There was even a Roman emperor, Julian, who was not a Christian and saw this parable as proof that Jesus taught his followers to be liars and thieves – not the kind of religion he wanted in his empire.

I don't remember the first time I came across this parable, but I do remember as a young person being puzzled by it. Why does Jesus say to use money to buy friends, but then, a few verses later, say to serve God, not money? What point was he really making?

Just like with the other parables, I want to see what insight this parable has into the nature of God's reign, and what lessons Jesus means to teach his followers.

One way to start is to try to understand what kind of scenario from life in Jesus' day that the parable described, and work out the meaning from there. I spent a lot of time reading about this parable. It turns out even the experts reconstruct the parable in different ways.

Generally, they agree that the master in the parable is a large landowner. The debtors are probably peasants or farmers who work the land and have to give a certain amount of their harvests to the landowner. Instead of cash, they owe the master commodities.

The manager or steward is hired to manage the estate, including negotiating rent or loan agreements.

In our country, we have a pretty high percentage of farmland owned by the same people that farm it – about 60%.¹ The situation in Jesus' day was different. Those who lived off the land didn't control it, but had to pay a percentage of their yields in rents or taxes. The land was controlled by people in an elite class.

But questions remain.

1. The manager is accused of wasting the master's possessions. Is he actually guilty? Or a victim of false accusation?
2. When the manager reduces the debts for the peasants, what actually got cut?
 - a. Hidden interest that never was supposed to be there?
 - b. The manager's own cut?
 - c. Or goods that rightfully belonged to the master?
3. What kind of person is the master?
 - a. Does he represent God – willing to be merciful to the manager, just as the father of the prodigal son was merciful? (The parable of the dishonest manager comes right after the story of the prodigal son.)

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/land-use-land-value-tenure/farmland-ownership-and-tenure/>

- b. Or is the master a rich oppressor, just like the rich man of the next parable who showed no compassion for poor Lazarus who begged at his gate?

So without being able to answer all of those questions with certainty, I'll give one interpretation. I'll pretend for a few moments that I'm the manager:

(MONOLOGUE)

Someone must really have it in for me! Maybe it's one of the debtors – I know they hate me for charging them such high rent.

Wasting the boss' property? Are you kidding?

OK, I might have given myself a few cash advances, but I was going to pay the boss back. You know that trader who came around last month has the best wine, and it could be three years before he comes again.

So now I'm in trouble. My boss – the biggest landowner of our province, by the way, is firing me and demanding that I return the books.

What else can I do? I've never been a day-laborer. I'd never be able to compete with some of those muscular guys, plus it's well... a little embarrassing to be begging for work from some of the same farmers that I've been hounding to pay the rent they owe my boss.

All I've ever been is an agent, writing rent agreements, and loans, and living off of commissions. I don't have any other skills!

But... *here's* an idea. I have a few hours before I have to give the account books back. No one knows I've been fired. I have a small window of time to go strike up a deal with each of the farmers. They all owe really big chunks of their harvest.

I'll just say, "my boss knows it's been a hard year with very little rain, so we're going to cut you a break." We'll change the contract, in their handwriting.

"So you owe a hundred jugs of olive oil? Let's make that 50."

"A thousand bushel of wheat? Hmm, could you do 800?"

They'll be thrilled, and they're more likely to actually make their payments. The only way that this backfires is if the boss insists on backing out of the deals. But how's he going to do that, when he'd go from the most popular man in the village to the most hated?

What do I have to lose? I'm already fired. And this way, I'll at least make some friends.

It might just be that the boss will see he still needs someone like me working for him.

LUKE'S INTERPRETATION

As the parable ends, Jesus teaches about money. We'll come back to what, exactly, we are supposed to learn from this shrewd manager.

Jesus' parables always made a comparison between the world as he knew it – with some surprising twists – and God's way.

We need to be careful not to assume that the way things work in the parable has Jesus' blessing – in this case a system where a single landowner has massive wealth while the majority population struggle to survive. In fact, Jesus calls the manager a “manager of injustice,” maybe signaling that the whole system was unjust, not just the manager.

Yet Jesus says to use *worldly wealth* to earn friends for ourselves. Jesus knew that it isn't possible to completely shun money. We must know how to use it wisely, in such a way that God is our master, and not money.

Jesus' language had a word – mammon – that described any kind of resource that had value. So he gave a simple and profound lesson about it.

If you are faithful in little, you will also be faithful in much. If you are unjust in little, you will be unjust in much. Surely this statement isn't limited to money, but it applies to money.

Faithfulness with mammon is more than keeping accounts straight, growing wealth, or improving honest profit. Surely Jesus means putting our monetary resources at the service of the values of God's upside-down kingdom, where debts are forgiven and no one goes hungry.

Issues of how we use our money are complicated and fraught. I'm probably opening a black hole. We will not answer all the questions.

But the fundamental discipleship principle is to ask who we are serving? What's this for? Are my actions and choices reflecting a priority of making God's kingdom visible in my life and community? Or does money have its own kind of power over me?

The Gospel of Luke has some very harsh words about money. For example, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus proclaimed “Blessed are the poor... Blessed are those who hunger now...” and “Woe to you who are rich... woe to you who are well-fed now.”

Jesus asked a ruler to sell all he had, give to the poor, and come follow him. The man couldn't do it. We also have the story of Zacchaeus who had unjust wealth, but Jesus celebrates when he has a change of heart. The rich aren't shut out of God's kingdom.

The early teachers of the church also had strong words about money.

For example, Ambrose of Milan said to well-off people, “You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor person. You are giving him back what is his... The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich.”²

² From *On Naboth*, late 380s; https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html

Basil the Caesarea said this: “The bread you hold back belongs to the hungry ... the shoes rotting in your closet belong to those without shoes; the silver which you keep hidden in a safe place belongs to the one in need. You wrong as many people as you could have provided for.”³

Ouch! I know there are certainly people we could provide for but don’t. Where does that leave us? We might not all feel rich, but certainly on a global scale, we are well off. Would Jesus say we are rich? What would Jesus say to us?

Let’s come back to that manager.

I’ll admit that even the word “shrewd” isn’t the first quality I’d think of for a follower of Jesus. He could also be described as “astute,” “cunning,” or “clever.”

There’s no question the manager is shrewd, but it was the decision of English translators to describe him that specific word.

The original text simply states that the manager acted “*wisely*.” And that’s a quality commended many places in the Gospels.

Jesus told followers to be as “wise as serpents” while also as “innocent as doves.” Jesus told a parable about “wise virgins” who brought extra oil to keep their lamps burning, or the “wise man” who built his house on the rock. A few chapters back, Jesus praised a “faithful and prudent manager.”

I think Jesus is trying to say, “See how clever those people are? You need to be just as clever, but for the kingdom of God.” If Jesus had watched Ocean’s 11, he’d have said the same thing.

As followers of Jesus, we need to be wise. That means acting if we are in a situation of urgency and making the cleverest decisions that we can.

Wise with what? With money? Sure, but keeping in mind the parable speaks to God’s reign, while describing life in the realm of competition for wealth.

Jesus said that we cannot serve both God and Mammon as our primary allegiance. Jesus did not tell the parable to give his followers tips on how to make money or secure their position cutthroat environments. It’s rather applying that skill in the service of an upside-down kingdom.

Sometimes it may be wise choices for the sake of our own survival. Other times it will be making wise and strategic choices for the sake of the survival and dignity of marginalized people.

I’ve seen examples of creating that fabric of care here in the Goessel community, knowing its work that doesn’t end and may not solve all the problems.

³ (Homily on the saying of the *Gospel According to Luke*, “I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones,” and on greed), <https://orthocath.wordpress.com/2010/03/12/st-basil-the-great-on-stealing-from-the-poor/>

I also saw a story about mobile shower units operating in Wichita to allow unhoused people the dignity of a shower. Our congregation continues to support the New Hope Shelter, which helps people get back on their feet.

We see glimpses of God's reign, just like the reduction of debts in the parable is a glimpse of God's reign. Jesus said his ministry was about:

*Good news announced to the poor,
freedom proclaimed for the prisoners,
and recovery of sight for the blind,
the oppressed set free (Luke 4:18)*

CONCLUSION

The economy worked a differently in Jesus' day than in ours. But in both times, there was huge inequality.

Some people have lavish wealth for whatever reason. Others struggle, whether they've made good choices or not, in a world where the deck is stacked against them.

In both Jesus' day and ours, there is a systemic aspect to issues of economic justice. When Jesus told this parable, he wasn't baptizing the way the agricultural economy of his day worked. Jesus also wasn't giving a blueprint for what to replace it with.

Jesus called his followers to use the same level of skill as the manager to work quietly and steadily for a different kingdom, a different way of life.

A spiritual kingdom, sure, but not one limited to private devotions. This alternative way of life deals with material realities, including money. It deals with real people, with real needs.

We see its seeds every time we see generosity with time and money. Every time we see burdens lifted, every time we see hope kindled for the hopeless

May God give us wisdom, astuteness, and cleverness in Christ's service so that we might transform our small corner of it toward the shape of God's reign of love.

BENEDICTION – ABRIDGED FROM RUTH FOX, OSB, (VT 1058)

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work tirelessly for justice, freedom, and peace....

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.