

We are just coming out of Luke 15 where we have the parables or stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son. In those parables there is joy and celebration when the lost item or person is found or returns to its rightful place. Now as we enter Luke 16 we are met with the first of two parables about a rich man. We have the one we'll hear today and then another that we'll hear next week. These parables tell us the type of relationship we should have with the material possessions in our care, whether that's money or physical goods. They are a good reminder for us as individuals and us as a church body that as followers of Jesus, our relationship with money should look different from the rest of the world. Let's hear the words of Jesus first from the NRSV translation then I will read the message paraphrase. Listen for God's word to you this day from the gospel according to Luke, chapter 16, verses 1 through 13.

Luke 16:1-13

NRSV:

Then Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. <sup>2</sup> So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I

hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.’<sup>3</sup> Then the manager said to himself, ‘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.’<sup>4</sup> I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’<sup>5</sup> So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’<sup>6</sup> He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’<sup>7</sup> Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’<sup>8</sup> And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.<sup>9</sup> And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth<sup>[b]</sup> so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “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. <sup>11</sup> If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth,<sup>[d]</sup> who will entrust to you the true

riches? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? <sup>13</sup> No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”<sup>[e]</sup>

The Message paraphrase:

<sup>1-2</sup> Jesus said to his disciples, “There was once a rich man who had a manager. He got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses. So he called him in and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? You’re fired. And I want a complete audit of your books.’

<sup>3-4</sup> “The manager said to himself, ‘What am I going to do? I’ve lost my job as manager. I’m not strong enough for a laboring job, and I’m too proud to beg. . . . Ah, I’ve got a plan. Here’s what I’ll do . . . then when I’m turned out into the street, people will take me into their houses.’

<sup>5</sup> “Then he went at it. One after another, he called in the people who were in debt to his master. He said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

<sup>6</sup> “He replied, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’

“The manager said, ‘Here, take your bill, sit down here—quick now—write fifty.’

<sup>7</sup> “To the next he said, ‘And you, what do you owe?’

“He answered, ‘A hundred sacks of wheat.’

“He said, ‘Take your bill, write in eighty.’

<sup>8-9</sup> “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

<sup>10-13</sup> Jesus went on to make these comments:

If you’re honest in small things,

    you’ll be honest in big things;

If you’re a crook in small things,

    you’ll be a crook in big things.

If you're not honest in small jobs,  
who will put you in charge of the store?

No worker can serve two bosses:

He'll either hate the first and love the second

Or adore the first and despise the second.

You can't serve both God and the Bank.

This is the Word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

I don't know about you all but this parable has always made me scratch my head. It's a difficult one to figure out and is often avoided when it pops up in the lectionary because of the confusion it causes. It seems toward the middle that Jesus might be praising the manager for his deceitful ways which seems out of line of other things we know about Jesus, and then there's the question about whether the people pay for their debts or just mark off their bill for when it's due later? So what is the point? To really get the point we have to first look at the historical background and get an understanding of the economic system of the day.

The way land ownership worked is that there would be very wealthy people who would acquire land often times because the farmers would become overtaxed in some way and when they could no longer financially keep up they would have to forfeit their land. But those very wealthy people who were typically not farmers themselves but were instead business men living down in Jerusalem while the farms were in the northern region of galilee, the business men would allow these poor farmers to continue living on their land to farm it, then the wealthy business owners would have managers or stewards of their properties who would make their rounds collecting the debt owed to the owner. This would include materials like olive oil and wheat.

But the managers didn't just get the flat amount owed because the wealthy, distant landowner had already rolled in interest into the principle, and the manager of the properties also needed to make some money so they would tack on a fee and then there was always something owed to Rome so there would be even more added to the bottom line. As New Testament scholar William Herzog explains, "The hidden interest rates appear to have been about 25 percent for money and 50 percent for goods."<sup>1</sup> So now you see how the poor farmers would quickly be buried under debt and Jesus is

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<sup>1</sup> Rossing, Barbara, Working Preacher, September 2016.

calling attention to not only how common of a practice this is but also to how all of this is happening in a Jewish culture ignoring Hebrew texts that explicitly speak against the use of interest in relationship with the poor.

As Theologian Barbara Rossing says: “Rich landlords and rulers were loan-sharks, using exorbitant interest rates to amass more land and to disinherit peasants of their family land, in direct violation of biblical covenantal law. The rich man or "lord" (*kyrios*, v. 3, 8), along with his steward or debt collector, were both exploiting desperate peasants.”<sup>2</sup>

So somehow word gets back to the rich man that the manager is not doing their job well, we don't have the details on what that means but its enough that it's going to cost him his job and the manager quickly realizes he better figure something out because he's about to be in a predicament with no job and a lot of bridges burned. What does he do? He decides he needs to get in the good graces of these people he's been wronging all this time. So he goes to them and tells them to change the amount they owe his boss. His motives are definitely selfish, he is looking out for himself, knowing that he's going to need people who will help him

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<sup>2</sup> Rossing, Barbara, *Working Preacher*, September 2016.

out before long and maybe they'll return the favor when he comes calling. This is where it's unclear as to whether he actually collects the debt due or just marks their bills.

Either way, once again the land owner hears of the managers dealings and is actually impressed with how shrewd, or better words for that would be how wise or prudent the manager was when he realized his predicament. And then is the surprising part, Jesus seems to praise the manager too. This is where the message paraphrase really helps to clarify the language from the NRSV translation. The message says this: "I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is *right*—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior."

Then Jesus goes on to conclude with words that hit us all a little hard but couldn't be any clearer. Saying, "You cannot serve God and wealth."

Jesus is reminding us that we serve the reign of God here and now, that we have a creator God who cares for each and every one of us as emphasized in the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son, and we are asked to respond to that love with the way we live our lives and that

includes the way we serve God with all the material goods in our possession, all the wealth we have to our name.

Jesus isn't saying wealth is bad, he's saying you can't serve the pursuit and acquisition of money and of more possessions and serve the God who created you to be in loving relationship with all of creation. It is not possible to serve two God's. The manager, who had used his wise ways for serving the God of money, had a transformation in this parable that led him to serve the creator God and relationships with people above the acquisition of more. His motives may not have been pure to begin with but it seems the prioritization of relationship, of righting the wrongs that had been heaped on these poor farmers, was enough to warrant Jesus' praise.

We all make decisions about how we use the things in our possession, whether it's money or our car, or our house, or our clothes, or even the food we grow or purchase. We are all part of a larger economic system that interrelates and impacts people far beyond ourselves. And Jesus is making it clear that in all our decision making related to our spending and purchasing we should be placing our relationship with God and God's creation as the priority in determining what is right.

You may have seen this week in the news that the owner of the outdoor clothing brand Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard, set up his company in a trust that will go toward fighting climate change. He could have taken his company public, he could have sold it outright, but he is investing the value of the company \$3 billion and all of its future earnings, averaging \$100 million a year, into care for this planet for future generations. Mr. Chouinard, it seems to me, is living out the command of this parable. He is turning upside down an economic system that is about individual, personal gain, at the expense of the other, and is prioritizing the relationship his company has with its employees and the planet, and future generations who will live on this planet, for a time that will long outlive him, and not to any one person's benefit, but for the benefit and the well-being of all.

I'll conclude with this from pastor Robb McCoy: "Perhaps the level of confusion that this parable stirs is evidence of how remarkably important it really is. This one blows our mind, because it seems to go against all of our common understanding of fairness.

And that's just it. The Kingdom of God has little to do with fairness. It has little to do with keeping proper ledgers and making sure that everyone gets what is their due. The Kingdom of God is about relationships. It is about reconciliation. It is about forgiving our debts, as we forgive our debtors. It is not an easy story to hear. It is sometimes an even harder story to live. It doesn't make good economic sense. Jesus had a funny way of not making sense.

It doesn't make sense to plant a weed in a garden. It doesn't make sense to ruin a whole vat of flour with some leaven. It doesn't make sense to turn your other cheek, throw a party for people that can't invite you to theirs, leave behind a flock because one sheep strayed, or throw a party for your good-for-nothing son who finally came back home with his tail between his legs.

It doesn't make sense that God would come to earth and take on flesh. It doesn't make sense that God would claim me as his own, or invite me to the Table of Grace. It doesn't make sense that Jesus would do all he could for a people that responded by nailing him to a cross. It doesn't make sense that tomb was empty, or that disciples have been able to

experience Christ in the breaking of bread for centuries since he was said to be dead.

This strange parable is a doozie. It is a challenge. It is a challenge to look at what canceling debt really looks like. It is a challenge to take a close look at how I serve wealth over God. It is a challenge to look at how I spend money, how I save money, and how I treat others. It is a strange one, all right. Maybe that's how God intended it."<sup>3</sup>

In an interview after the Patagonia announcement this week Mr. Chouinard said this, "I feel a big relief that I've put my life in order."<sup>4</sup> What would it take for you to be able to say the same?

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> McCoy, Robb, Pulpit Fiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper20c/#Luke16%3A1-13=>.

<sup>4</sup> Gelles, David, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/climate/patagonia-climate-philanthropy-chouinard.html>, September 14, 2022.