

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 18, 2016
Pentecost 18
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 8:4-12
Psalm 138
I Timothy 2:1-8
Luke 16:1-13

After reading the Scripture lessons for this week, especially the Gospel lesson, I found myself almost ready to give in to a temptation that sometimes confronts preachers. The temptation: To stand up and tell your congregation: *I have no idea what this passage of Scripture means!*

But at the risk of opening my mouth only to change feet (!), I think we need to wrestle together with this Gospel lesson this morning. Scripture scholars are divided as to its meaning, and I doubt very much that we will have the last word on it when we finish, but we need to do our best anyway.

The text is a parable, or at least the first part of the text. Various English translations give it different titles: The parable of the Unjust Steward, the Dishonest Manager, the Shrewd Manager, the Unrighteous Steward, and the Crooked Manager.

This steward confronts the reality that he can't go on living the way he has been living. He is under judgment, and must account for what he has done. He is

no model of repentance. But he makes a prudent calculation – to use his last hours in charge of his master’s property to show mercy to others, to relieve their debts.

He is a child of this world, driven by a purely selfish motive – to make friends and be welcomed into the homes of his master’s debtors. Yet his prudence is commended as an example to those who are children of light.

Christians through the centuries have been offended by this parable. One major reason is that many find it *disturbing that Jesus would find anything commendable in a person who has acted dishonestly*. Some scholars have even tried to “clean” this steward up by saying that his reduction of the various bills owed his master was simply the subtraction of the steward’s commission, a temporary loss he was willing to sustain in exchange for favorable treatment in the future.

This is interesting, but if it were true, the steward would not have been dishonest. The more likely interpretation is that he falsified the amounts owed his master to gain the favor of those who would later offer him hospitality in the time of his unemployment (v. 4).

This leaves many believers struggling to figure out how Jesus could commend this man’s actions.

And while we can identify with this, if we stop and think a moment, would we not have to admit that all of us are a “mixed bag” of the commendable and the

not-so-commendable? We are a mixed bag of motivations and attitudes, and I would hate to think that Jesus might write me off completely because of one of my flaws.

So, while acknowledging our possible discomfort with this steward, and with this parable, what might be the upshot for us on this lovely Fall day?

Given what we heard from Amos, and what we encounter throughout Scripture, I think we would be on solid ground to say that *how we handle and manage money and material resources has eternal consequences*.

In that light, let me offer three related truths in this regard:

1. Wealth is both a blessing and a responsibility. Throughout Scripture, God blesses people *in order that they might be a blessing to others*. And what we usually find is that *people are held accountable less for the resources they have than how they use them*. Perhaps one lesson that this steward learns here is that he is brought to the realization that he has placed more value on amassing wealth than he has on developing relationships. If so, the opportunity for repentance would be held out to him.

2. Wealth – along with status, power, and privilege – is fleeting. One day this dishonest manager is on top of the world. The next day he faces disaster. We are not so far removed from this. Think back to 2008 and the financial

meltdown in this country that saw many people lose much of what they had worked years to accumulate.

There is a reason for Jesus saying that we cannot serve both God and mammon. It's because mammon proves to be a very fickle and ultimately untrustworthy master. God's love, care, and attention, however, are constant.

3. In times of crisis, God often appears where we least expect to find Him. Many situations like this can be found in Luke's Gospel. Remember the Jewish traveler left for dead along the road? The unexpected help comes from the "Good Samaritan."

In next week's Gospel, a rich man will end up begging for help from Lazarus, a slave whom he ignored.

And here, this dishonest manager, who will now suddenly be dependent on those who used to look to him for loans.

From Mary's *Magnificat* through the Beatitudes to Jesus' death on the Cross, God regularly shows up in those places where we least expect God to be. The reason is so that we do not become tempted to place our faith in the wrong place.

I think if the dishonest steward in this story could speak to us this morning, he would tell us that we are placed on this earth to love and care for each other, not to separate ourselves from each other with wealth, status, or privilege. I think

he would agree with the ancient church father St. Augustine, who said that God has given us *people to love and things to use*. Sin shows up when we get the order of that confused.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we come with a discovery that we share with the dishonest steward. We come recognizing that all that we have is not honestly ours. In truth, it belongs to Another, our Lord and Master.

All the money in the world could not pay the debt we owe to our Master. So, he paid it for us. He gave his life as a ransom for all, as St. Paul says in our Epistle.

Let us receive the grace he offers us today thankfully. And then let us serve Him by using what he has entrusted to us to lift the lowly, serve those in need, and give our lives away.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[I am indebted to Dr. David Lose, Dr. Fred Craddock, and Dr. Scott Hahn for much of the material in this sermon.]