

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 18, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

First Reading: Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; Second Reading: 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Gospel: Luke 16:1-13

“Where True Riches are Found”

Beloved in Christ

Grace and peace to you from God our creator, Jesus our brother and the Holy Spirit our comforter and Guide. Amen.

How are we to understand this story in which Jesus seems to be commending to us the behavior of a dishonest manager? Nearly all of the commentators I consulted said that this story of is probably one of the most confusing and difficult texts in the entire lectionary. Which reminded me of dear Pr. Mau, who always said that she loved preaching on a difficult text. (Which makes we wonder if this might have been one of her all-time favorites?) I can't say that I share Pr. Mau's enthusiasm for such challenging passages of scripture, but trusting in the Holy Spirit, I'm going to wade in and see if we can find where God is speaking to us.

The first thing we need to keep in mind is that this is a parable – a story which was meant to shock or surprise Jesus' listeners.

Parables usually begin as stories about ordinary people doing very ordinary things... looking for a lost coin, working in a vineyard, managing a business. Their very “ordinariness” helps us relate to the characters in the story. We all know what it's like to search for something that is lost, to go to work to earn a wage, to manage the finances of our lives. What makes parables so powerful, is the way they surprise us with unexpected outcomes that turn the tables on what we thought we knew about the world, about God and about ourselves. After all, what sort of person would bother searching the entire house for a single penny? Who would go to work at the very end of the day and expect to be paid a full day's wage? Who, when faced with total financial ruin, would forgive the debts owed, rather than collect them in full? Parables show us a different way of looking at the world, and seeing anew how the kingdom of God is continually breaking in to our world, our lives and our communities.

Jesus' First Century listeners would have understood the economic relationships in this parable, but we might need a little help to interpret what was really going on. Wealthy landowners routinely employed a manager to oversee their property. The absentee landowner would give the manager full legal authority over all the operations, and incomes, from the property. In [this morning's](#) story, it's brought to the landowner's

attention that his manager is wasting his property. In other words, the owner suspects that the manager has been under-reporting the true profits from the business in order to put those profits into his own pocket. So naturally, the landowner demands a full audit of the books.

What's important to realize here is that the manager worked on commission. His cost was built into every transaction so that he could earn his living by keeping a percentage of the money he collected for the landowner. Apparently, this manager had been keeping more than he was entitled to and now he's in serious trouble. If he loses his job, he will be cast into poverty and homelessness. There were no "unemployment benefits" in those days - no social safety nets to protect the poor. The manager is going to have to do something fast if he doesn't want to end up on the street.

At this point in the story you may be saying to yourself "Well, he's just getting what he deserves." And that would be a fair assessment. If you cheat you'll get caught, and you'll be punished. That's the way the world works. But this is not an ordinary story - it's a parable told by Jesus, and because Jesus made the dishonest manager THE central character in this parable, we would be wise to pay careful attention to what happens next.

With financial disaster looming, the manager decides to use the last bit of his authority to engage in some large scale acts of debt forgiveness. He grabs the accounting ledger, goes out to the debtors, and starts writing off significant portions of their debt. One man owes 800 gallons of oil - which is equivalent to several years of an average salary. The manager writes off half of what's owed. (Think in terms of having, let's say - 50% of your mortgage forgiven.) The next person gets a 20% reduction in the bushels of wheat which are owed, and this goes on and on until all the accounts are settled. A great deal of debt - a great deal of potential revenue - has simply been cleared off the books.

Now that is quite a surprising thing for this manager to do. After all, you'd think that if one was headed for financial ruin, one would hang on tightly to every last shekel one had. We know that this man has been embezzling the profits from the landowner. What you'd expect from such a character is that he would grab all the money he could carry and high tail it out of town - taking his ill-gotten gains and running off to make a comfortable new life for himself. Or quite possibly, he could have acted in the way that the unforgiving servant did in one of Jesus' other parables. When that man got into financial trouble, he went to those who owed him money, physically assaulted them, and then had them thrown in prison until they paid up.

Instead this manager does something entirely unexpected. With seemingly careless abandon, he writes off huge sums of debt, and in doing so, wins for himself the love and friendship of the community. By forgiving the debt in the accounts that he managed, and by relinquishing his own share of the profits, he discovered the true riches of life in a community which is grounded in forgiveness. And that, I believe is why Jesus commends him to us. It is not because of his dishonesty in cheating his boss. It is because when faced with losing his job, his home and his place in the community, he undergoes a

radical change of heart. He turns from his selfish greed and chooses the path of forgiveness.

Many years ago, my family and I were living in student housing at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Our monthly rent was about \$450. I was a stay at home mom with 2 kids under the age of 3. My former husband was a full-time student. We struggled every month to make ends meet, but we were making it work. When our only car broke down – which was the vehicle I used to get to my church organist job on the south side – the cost of the repairs wiped out our savings, and left us in a financially precarious situation. We had enough money for groceries, but we were no longer able to keep up on our rent. The seminary business office was patient with us, gently reminding us each month of our accumulating debt, but never threatening to evict us. We tried as best we could to catch up, but by the time we moved out to go to our internship site, we still owed \$1800. When the next bill from the seminary business office arrived, I opened it with my usual sense of anxiety and guilt. But to my great shock and surprise, what I discovered was that our bill had been zeroed out. Someone who worked in the business office had cancelled, in full, the total amount that we owed – the entire \$1800. Did that bookkeeper do something a bit questionable in order to clear the books? Maybe. I don't know. What I do know is that it was completely unexpected – and it was pure grace. We had done nothing, nothing at all, to deserve this forgiveness of debt. In that generous act of forgiving our debt, the astonishing grace of the kingdom of God had come very near to us, and all we could do was give thanks and praise.

The story of the dishonest manager will always be troubling to us if we look at it from this world's point of view. Radical forgiveness of legitimate debt is no way to run a business or manage our accounts. But in telling this parable, Jesus wasn't giving us advice on how to be successful managers or how to practice accounting. There's plenty of that kind of advice around already. What Jesus is showing us in this parable is how we are called to live together as "children of light" - as members of the body of Christ. And that way of life is first and foremost about forgiveness, the forgiveness which flows freely and abundantly from the loving heart of God into our lives, and through us, to the world.

Here in this place, we experience what it is like to live together as forgiven and beloved children of God. We greet one another in the name of Jesus and share Christ's peace. We listen together to the living Word of God, Words with power to speak to our hearts and minds of all that God has done for us. In melodies ancient and new, we sing together our praises and [thanksgiving](#). And we come with open hands to this most amazing feast (one hymn writer has called it "the feast of the universe"), where a bit of bread and sip of wine fill us to overflowing with the true riches of God's love and forgiveness, freely given to us in the body and blood of Jesus. Then we are sent forth to be agents of God's generous forgiveness and mercy, in our homes, our workplaces, and our communities – wherever our lives can touch another with the true riches of God's mercy. Amen.