

Sermon for Sunday, September 22, 2019 - "Unjust Wealth"

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 22, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This is a strange story. Hearing it set in our time might help. This modern retelling was offered by ELCA Pastor Elizabeth Rawlings¹ (*with some editing by me for ease of speaking*).

Imagine this:

Sam works for an investment company, managing a portfolio of repackaged debt. They sell packages of medical debt, mortgages, credit card debt, etc. for pennies on the dollar to investors who then either continue to collect debt payments with obscene amounts of interest or attempt to collect on the debt. Now, imagine Sam's boss hears through the grapevine that his performance is less than spectacular. Sam is asked to come to a meeting and give an account for everything bought, sold, and earned. Facing the prospect of termination, Sam comes up with a plan to make some friends in case of unemployment; he goes into the system and reduces the amount owed by hundreds of people. Sam emails those people to let them know that their debts - under which many were drowning - have now been cut by at least half. The recipients of Sam's debt forgiveness are now more able to pay off their debts, and more able to do other things - like pay rent and buy food.

Sam gets fired, but not before the story goes viral - grateful people have posted all over social media about the generous stranger who erased their debt. Someone starts a GoFundMe for Sam. Sam's boss, though angry, is also quietly impressed at the moves Sam made. He texts Sam a message: 'Well played. You're fired'. A master of working people over for money, the boss recognizes and appreciates the way Sam used the system to work over the business and gain from it. The company realizes they can take credit for the debt relief and lure more borrowers to the company. Sam's shrewdness ends up getting him a promotion instead of a firing. This retelling helps me get a sense of what's going on in this parable. I've never understood why Jesus tells a story in which a dishonest manager is commended and why he tells us to make friends for ourselves by means of dishonest wealth.

Yet the manager's actions do benefit those who had crushing debts - a very common problem in the ancient world. Rich landowners, like this manager's boss, were like loan sharks charging exorbitant interest rates that caused real harm to ordinary people.

¹ Rev. Elizabeth Rawlings at

<https://www.disruptworshipproject.com/rcl/the-season-after-pentecost-25c>

Jesus is not a fan of this kind of stuff, to put it mildly. Jesus has the very heart of God and throughout scripture we see that God is deeply concerned with the poor. We see in our Amos reading today, throughout the Psalms and the Prophets, that God has special concern for the poor. And Jesus' whole ministry, especially as interpreted by the Gospel of Luke, is focused on bringing down the rich and mighty and raising up the poor and lowly so that all can experience God's abundance, both in this life and eternally.

I think Jesus is commending the manager here for helping others to have enough, even though the manager's motives seem a bit sketchy, even though it seems he's just doing it to get ahead, himself. In the end, his actions do serve to relieve the pain of the poor and that's really important to Jesus. Perhaps Jesus is saying he wants us to take action to help others even if our motives aren't completely pure. He knows our actions will never be totally altruistic and people need help, anyway.

The modern retelling also helps me make sense of that strange phrase that is often translated, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth." The original Greek that usually gets translated "dishonest" actually means unjust, unrighteous or wicked. That changes the meaning of Jesus' words quite a bit. Because when you think about it, in this broken world, all our wealth is in some way unjust - even if we've worked hard and earned our money in honest ways, even if we don't work for unjust companies that make their money charging predatory interest rates. As Pastor Rawlings points out, "All of our money filters through the global economy ... and somewhere along the way our money has been run through the hands of some person or business that is unjust."

We could get paralyzed thinking about injustice and macroeconomics and all the implications of the way money is used. Or, we can focus on using our money to help others.

Jesus teaches here that we can't serve both wealth and God. And he works to set us free from enslavement to wealth and debt so that we might know the joy of serving God and being in relationship with others.

This story seems to be showing us how we can experience that freedom and help others to experience it. We can use the wealth and the influence we have to free others from crushing debt. We can advocate for debt relief policies for poor nations and individuals and for caps on predatory payday lending. We can advocate for policies that help to make sure wealth is more evenly shared.

When we do this, we are living in the ways of Jesus, in ways that help us and other people to be at home in God's abundance, now and always. Our church body, the ELCA, gives us help in such work. We have a shared ministry called ELCA Advocacy. Here is a description of that ministry:

"As members of the ELCA, we believe that we are freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbor. God uses our hands, through our direct service work, and our voices, through our advocacy efforts, to restore and reconcile our world. Through faithful advocacy, the ELCA lives out our Lutheran belief that governments can help advance the common good.

ELCA advocacy works for change in public policy based on the experience of Lutheran ministries, programs and projects around the world and in communities across the United States. We work through political channels on behalf of the following biblical values: peacemaking, hospitality to

strangers, care for creation, and concern for people living in poverty and struggling with hunger and disease.”

ELCA Advocacy regularly sends out alerts and opportunities to use our voices and influence. There is an advocacy alert right now related to a proposed change to SNAP (food stamp program) that would impact 3.1 million children, family and disabled adults. Look for the Social Justice Subcommittee on laptops during Fellowship Hour today to participate in that. You can also sign up at www.elca.org/advocacy to get additional information and have the alerts sent to your email.

Christ Jesus is always at work to set us free from enslavement to money and debt and to empower us to help set others free. Christ is always at work so that we and all people may know God’s abundance.

Let’s join in that work today and each day.

And let’s take a moment for silent prayer.