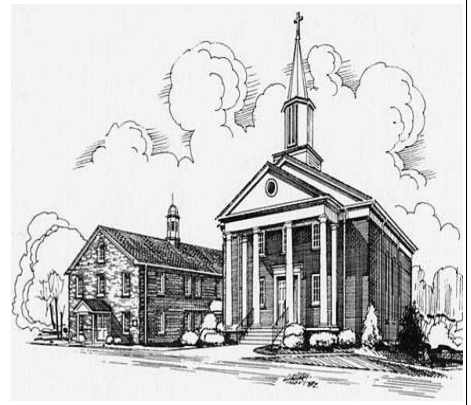


The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the

Sunday closest to September 20

Proper 20

Year C RCL



Amos 8:4-7
Psalm 113
Luke 16:1-13

The Collect

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Amos 8:4-7

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, "When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."
The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Psalm 113

Laudate, pueri

1 hallelujah!

Give praise, you servants of the LORD; *
praise the Name of the LORD.

2 Let the Name of the LORD be blessed, *
from this time forth for evermore.

3 From the rising of the sun to its going down *
let the Name of the LORD be praised.

4 The LORD is high above all nations, *
and his glory above the heavens.

5 Who is like the LORD our God, who sits enthroned on
high *

but stoops to behold the heavens and the earth?

6 He takes up the weak out of the dust *
and lifts up the poor from the ashes.

7 He sets them with the princes, *
with the princes of his people.

8 He makes the woman of a childless house *
to be a joyful mother of children.

Luke 16:1-13

Jesus 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. 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.’ 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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him,

‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’
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.’ 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. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

“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. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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.”

SERMON¹

I kid you not! I've struggled with the dishonest manager for years – even preached it – badly, I fear. It is a BEAR. Superficially, the parable appears to present the story of a manager who cheats his master and is commended by Jesus for being a liar and a thief. How in the world do I preach that? When you're in a position in which you have to hold forth on something you don't understand very well, there are really only two courses open: Bluff, or go find someone who DOES understand and ask him. That's what I did, and I extend my thanks to Rev. J. Jeffrey Smead. Here's what he taught me.

The first insight I received from Rev. Smead is the most important, and it is this: everything hinges on understanding that this parable is about God, sin, grace and salvation. It is not about honesty when dealing with

¹ Much of this Message is from a Book by Kenneth E. Bailey Titled "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes". The sermon was derived from "A Gracious Master The Meaning Behind The Parable of The Unjust Manager" by J Jeffrey Smead

money. Write that down: “The subject is God, sin, grace and salvation. It is not about honesty when dealing with money.” It continues to discuss the theological theme that appears in the parable of the Prodigal Son – unwarranted grace. Both have a noble master who demonstrates extraordinary grace to one who has become wayward. Both have an ignoble son or manager who wastes the master's resources. In both cases the son or manager, unknowingly or knowingly, throws himself on the mercy of the noble master.

The second insight I gained was that I had misunderstood the roles of the cast of characters. There are three: the manager, the master, and the community. I got them wrong. Our natural expectation when reading one of Jesus' parables is to line up against the rich guy, and that's what I had been doing. As we will see to our surprise, the rich man is the good guy in this parable! So,

we'd better first examine the cast of characters. To grasp the parable's thrust, the character of each needs to be understood. We are told:

There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.

Right away, we have questions. Who brought these charges? Why would they be believed? The natural assumption is that the master's friends in the community told him not to trust his manager. We know that because if the reports were from other servants, the master would most certainly have investigated further, but he doesn't. Clearly, the reports are from sources that the master considers very reliable – business associates in the community. This tells us something about the rich man. If the rich man had been a scoundrel, the community would not have bothered to report the manager's

wrongful activities. Since the community DID report it, we now know that the community and the rich man are on good terms. There is no hint here that the rich man is in any way dishonest. Quite the contrary. He's well thought of by the community.

So, what of the manager? Not to put too fine a point on it, the manager is a liar and a thief, but a shrewd one. We now have our dramatis personæ – our cast of characters: a cheat, an honored rich man, and the community who holds the rich man in esteem. As the story opens, the manager is in deep trouble.

What is this I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management for you cannot be my manager any longer.

The Greek word translated “accounting” has a distinct article attached to it so a better translation is “the account books.” The manager is not asked to “balance

the books” but to “turn them in.” From this point on in the parable the manager is an ex-manager who has been fired but still has the account books. These two facts are critical.

On his way to collect the account books, the manager says to himself,

“What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig. I am ashamed to beg.”

In the middle of reflecting on his “outcast state” a light suddenly dawns. He wants to manage someone else's estate after he's fired, but if he is simply fired for corruption, no one will hire him. But, being a clever scoundrel he dreams up a cunning scheme. He has been told to relinquish the account books, yet they are still in his hands and the account books represent power!

“I know what I will do, so that when I am

dismissed as manager people may welcome me into their homes.”

The staff is not aware that he has been fired. He was dismissed in private. He summons each of his master's debtors to come to him. The debtors receive their summons and respond by going to the manager's office. They would not dream of appearing if they knew that he had been fired from his post. It is not harvest time, so the summons can only mean that the master has some important information that he wants the manager to communicate to them. And these are precisely the assumptions that the manager wants the wealthy debtors to have.

On the debtors' arrival, the manager conducts private interviews. Without witnesses, who can prove what was said? The manager knows exactly what he is doing. The depths in the reductions are enormous. Fifty mea-

asures of oil was worth about 500 denarii, which was the wage for a farm worker for a year and a half. The second debtor also receives an enormous reduction even though the percentage is different.....it too is worth about 500 denarii.

The manager wants the changes in their handwriting. Why? So that anyone looking at the accounts will recognize the handwriting, and know that the renters have been contacted and have accepted the terms in writing. Each debtor makes the change in his rental agreement and returns to the village to share the good news with family and friends. As word spreads in the village a festive mood breaks out in honor of the most generous man that ever rented land in the history of the village, and also in praise of his manager who convinced the master to make such huge reductions in their rents.

When the interviews are finished, the manager gathers the altered accounts and, probably with a smile, surrenders them to the master. The master takes the accounts, notes the changes recorded in the handwriting of his closest business associates and quickly considers his options. They are two.

First, legally he can go to the village and explain that the reductions were not authorized, the manager had been fired at the time he made these deals, so the original amounts must be paid in full. The damage to his relationship with the community, and to the community itself, which would be deprived an economic boon they believed they had secured, would be incalculable.

Or, second, he could remain quiet, pay the price of this clever scoundrel and preserve his relationship with the community – a relationship which was enhanced by this ruse of the manager, not created by it.

At last, we have arrived at the meaning of this bear of a parable. This parable is about God, sin, grace and salvation. It is not about honesty when dealing with money. The Master will pay the price imposed upon Him by this sinner and preserve the community. Did the manager manipulate the Master to get his way? No, quite the opposite. He could not manipulate the Master to change his nature. Indeed, the manager built his plan on the basis of the generous nature of his Master. Church, we serve a God of Grace. God may be trusted, but never manipulated.

But what of the manager? We REALLY want to see him punished. That's our way. We NEED to see damnation as a consequence of sin. (Unless it's our sin under discussion. Then, not so much.)

The master's way is to extend his grace even to the manager by paying the price imposed upon him by the

manager's actions. As a result, the community will find a place where the manager can be employed. And watched! God's grace does not convert us to non-sinners. He remains the sinner he was. This was a fraud, but it was a most clever and ingenious fraud, and there is a difference between 'I applaud the dishonored manager because he acted cleverly', and 'I applaud the clever manager because he acted dishonestly'. His morals are deplorable, yet he knows that his only hope, his only salvation is to put his entire trust in the unqualified mercy and grace of the master.

Beloved, Jesus wants “those in the light” those that know him as Savior and Lord to be resourceful – to step out in faith – to trust completely in the mercy and in the grace of Our Master, to trust him completely for our salvation. Beloved you can trust in the Grace of our Master. For he is the same yesterday,

today, and Forever.²

Amen and Amen!

² Ibid.

BENEDICTION

The master is known in the community as a good and generous man and he demonstrates it in his handling of the dishonest manager. He dismissed the manager but did not jail him. He could have sold the manager and his family as slaves to recoup his losses, yet he did not.

The community will ultimately discover the details and will be amazed at the manager's intelligence and daring. They will not trust him but will nonetheless employ him, reasoning that such a clever fellow must work for “us” and not for “them”. Nevertheless, it was the master who paid the price of the manager's salvation. He was faithful with the gift of wealth God had given him.

The listeners of this story would have known this and would have understood the extraordinary grace of

the master. So should we as we confess our sins each Sunday, and celebrate the amazing grace God extends to us.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give
you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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