

Luke 16: 1-13

Then 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 account 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.'

SERMON

I have a memory - It's at least 25 years ago - when I spent a full Saturday morning at a bible study in the heart of Lancaster County - led by a pastor relative who was invited back to the church he grew up in, to teach on the sermon on the mount - Matthew chapters 5-7. I remember very little about that study, except a clear moment, when, as we were going through the text, section by section - I think it was the beatitudes, with all the 'blessed are those who...' those sayings that always feel so complex and full of layers and meaning - when someone finished reading that section, and Pastor John said, 'OK, that's pretty clear, isn't it? We all know what that means... Let's move on...' and everyone around the table was nodding their heads, while I sat there stunned. Speechless. I didn't have the courage to say, 'wait a minute! I don't understand this at all! What does this mean for us today?' I had so many questions... and it seemed everyone else in that room had answers. They could sew up in a neat package these words of Jesus that left me tangled and full of questions.

And so it's with an attitude of curiosity that we start this journey into the parables -

Parables - these stories that are slippery, with twists and turns that catch us off guard. In many of our bibles (including our pew bibles) parables are given names - the parable of the lost sheep, or the parable of the prodigal son... It speaks to how in the past we acted as if there was one meaning, and we just needed to figure out the one meaning to unlock the meaning of the text.

But really - That's just not how parables work.

Jewish writer Amy-Jill Levine (Le-veen) reminds us that the term 'parable' comes from the Greek *para*, meaning "alongside, together with," as in parallel or paradox, and *ballo*, "to cast; to throw". Stories that cast, or throw meanings and ideas alongside one another. We need to understand the nuances of each side of the equation, she says - realizing that, with such comparisons, no single meaning can ever be determined.

In order to uncover what is conventional and what is unexpected in these stories, it's imperative to understand the history and context of the time. If we get the context wrong, we'll get Jesus wrong as well.

And... and, Levine says, the text must speak to each new generation.

For followers today, we need to ask: How do the messages an original audience would have heard translate over the centuries to us, now?

*The trick is to determine what is surprising in the parable, and what is not.*¹

What is surprising in the parable, and what is not.

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. 2014. *short stories by jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Harper One Publishers.

In the coming weeks, we'll look at several parables and wisdom sayings of Jesus found in Luke's gospel. We'll use them as cairns - helping us to find our way in the sometimes confusing landscape of our faith journeys. (ADD STONE TO CAIRN)

While most parables may not have one clear easy to understand message - we can turn to them, allow them to build upon one another, held in the context of time and place. A cairn is built by placing one stone upon another. It's not one stone, but many.

So we hold the teachings of Jesus together - the collective stories, AND we hold them as a collective community. Together we build and together we wrestle to try and understand what they mean for us today.

So let's take a look at this parable which, on the surface to our 21st Century ears, can seem very confusing.

Right before today's text, in Luke chapter 15, Jesus is talking in parables as he speaks to the tax collectors and sinners; the Pharisees and the scribes.

Our story today has Jesus talking directly to his disciples - but it must have been in earshot of others, because the verse following our scripture today says 'The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him.' (Luke 16:14)

That previous chapter - chapter 15, has 3 successive parables- the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son - Jesus tells these stories in response to the criticism of the religious leaders for his hanging out with sinners, those considered lost.

Chapter 16 is a continuation of chapter 15. Part of the same conversation - 2 more parables - 'there was a rich man'...'there was a rich man'.

While our modern bibles have chapters, verses and even headings, the original text doesn't have any of these markers that help us, today, to know where we are. But these markers we've created also create artificial starting and stopping points. The author of Luke's gospel has these parables coming one directly after the other.

When looking at this parable, it's vitally important that we understand the economics of 1st Century Palestine.

This land was ruled by the Romans - the Jews lived in an occupied land, we can never forget that as we live into Jesus' teaching - Israel was occupied by a foreign power - with the rich - both Roman and Jewish - living mostly in the south, in Judea, where the capital of Jerusalem was, and the poor in the more rural north, the area of Galilee.

The Roman occupiers needed not only money to support themselves, but lots of wheat, oil, and wine from the farms of Galilee - and they got it through heavy taxation of both goods and money - some historians believe the hidden interest rates passed onto the peasants appear to have been about 25 percent for money and 50 percent for goods.²

This taxation often involved the rich in the south - including the rich Jews, coming to those small farmers and saying - we've got a deal for you. We'll pay your taxes in exchange for the deed to your property.

You could stay on the land, live as tenant farmers, and every year give a percentage of what you grow - wheat, wine, oil, to the Lords.

When the wealthy Lords wanted to get their tribute from the farmers, they sent their managers, their stewards, to collect. These managers, including the shrewd steward in our story today, made their living by also tacking on an interest rate on top of the 50% layer for the landlord.

Wow - it's to that reality that Jesus speaks - so hold that system of taxation, and -

Remember, too, that throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' ministry invokes the biblical concept of Jubilee and debt forgiveness.

Economic restitution is part of the joy of Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:53) and the joy of the gospel proclaimed to tax collectors such as Zacchaeus, when Zach restores what he had "defrauded" four-fold. It's in that restoration of money that he, the hated tax collector, is also restored to his community.

Jesus' hearers would be immersed in that system...Those tenant farmers were squeezed dry from so many, including fellow Jews. And it's to those farmers and the rich religious elites that Jesus tells this story.

'There was a rich man who had a manager...'

A manager who is squandering the holdings - maybe that means he's not squeezing the farmers hard enough. Not making enough profit for the landowner.

And so he's fired- get your books together - give me a final accounting of what I'm owed.

Now the manager is caught in the middle, between the rich and the poor - he has no security.

Perhaps, in this story, the manager realizes how expendable he is to the rich Lord, and so he wakes up - does something unexpected - he switches sides - fixes it so that he'll be accepted by the poor. He makes the choice - a radical choice, of what community he truly wants to be a part of.

He gets some return for the rich man, but gives a break to the poor.

² [Commentary on Luke 16:1-13 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

Remember -

The trick to understanding is to determine what is surprising in the parable, and what is not.

Preacher and writer Brian McLaren³ suggests that this story is not about someone who's evil. It's about someone who sees through the injustice of the economic system and chooses to work, instead, for the poor. Like Zaccheus, who was transformed through the re-orientation to his wealth- maybe this unnamed steward has woken up to injustice and is choosing a new way.

How would that have been met by the farmers and rich listening to Jesus?

Where do we see these injustices in our world?

Today, we might see some of these same strategies in high-interest student loans, predatory pay-day loans, or harsh austerity measures imposed on countries whose citizens had no role in agreeing to a debt.⁴

Gabrielle Perry, a 29-year-old epidemiologist in New Orleans, expects \$20,000 of her \$135,000 student loan debt to be wiped out under the student loan debt forgiveness plan announced a few weeks ago. Perry, who cares for and financially supports her disabled mother, said those obligations act as a societal tax on Black people, preventing the growth of generational wealth.

Gabrielle faced steep challenges to complete her education. Homeless for nearly a year, she had to drop out of school and saw the interest on her loans balloon. She also faced incarceration, but was able to get her record expunged and earned a master's in public health from Tulane University. The pandemic-era freeze on student loan payments, combined with raises at work, allowed Perry to achieve a sense of stability for the first time in her life. While she is grateful for the relief, she laments the reality that Black borrowers carry, on average, four times the debt of white borrowers, and nearly half of those carrying student loans do not have a 4 year degree.⁵

It's a complicated, broken system that does not truly support the most marginalized in our society in their quest for a better life.

The kingdom of God has an economic system. A system that invites all of us to lose faith in the system where the rich are allowed to do whatever they want.

No, it says - everybody matters. Put God at the top. Love God and you'll see everything else in a new value system.

This new system that Jesus offers - it asks us to be liberated - to love God first, and put money in its proper place.

³ [Brian McLaren](#): A Sermon for Every Sunday, 9/22/19.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/biden-covid-health-education-07bf5c4ff1928793f01e907a63cafa36>

That middle man - the steward - working between the rich Lord and the farmers - he chose a new way that day - a surprising way. His last act of stewardship making their loans just a little more manageable - perhaps erasing his portion of profit from their debts. Not cheating the Lord out of his taxation, but not adding to their burden.

(Go back to CAIRN) These parables are full of surprises - challenging our assumptions and asking us to live in new ways - the ways of Jesus, the economics of Jesus, not of the world.

Maybe these stories show us a new way to walk in the world - one where money isn't the ultimate measure of all things. That it's better to use your wealth in the service of relationships than to use relationships in service of money.

May we take these stories seriously - wrestle with them, hold them as treasures that show us the way.

References:

Working Preacher's Sermon Brainwave # 862 for 9/18/22

SIDE NOTE:

'You can't serve two masters. Jesus tells his listeners: You will either hate God and love money, or love God and hate money. You cannot serve God and wealth.' (v. 13)

Hating money - *miseo*⁶ - we heard this same verb translated as hate a couple of weeks ago, in that passage where Jesus said 'hate your mother and father...' - where 'disregard' may be a translation that allows us to understand that passage better.

There's always a comparative meaning in the use of this word, hate - *miseo* - which centers in a moral choice, where one thing is elevated over another.

⁶ <https://biblehub.com/greek/3404.htm>