

Sermon for September 22, 2019 – “God’s Upside Down Economy”

25th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text(s): Luke 16:1-13

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As we continue down this rabbit hole of Jesus’ teaching and ministry in Luke we’ve heard of Jesus doing odd things, dealing with odd people and telling odd parables. He offered a lesson on storing grain. He offered dinner party advice. He offered a lesson on cross-carrying. All great stuff. But today, He talks about something that rubs against our American sense of pragmatism and that’s wastefulness. The manger in today’s parable is a squanderer. To squander is, of course, to waste. Wastefulness for us is a sin. In our 21st century society we worry very much about wasting anything. Wasting time, money, the environment and resources. If there’s anything we can imagine wasting we worry about wasting it except, apparently, as I’ve pointed out not long ago, food. To squander is to misuse, to mismanage, to fritter and waste things in an offhand way. But even more so in our go-getter society, it’s considered squandering when we fail to seize any opportunity set before us, when we fail to be in control. We worry about all of this.

What if we don’t collect what we are owed? What if we put our time and energy into something that doesn’t provide full value in return? It can get to the point that it bothers us when wastefulness and squandering isn’t punished and that’s the trouble of Jesus’ parable today. A lot of the time it’s hard to make sense of what exactly Jesus is saying but today He’s said something that kind of sounds a bit crazy. Jesus’ story starts out a little rocky. It’s about a rich man whose property manager is accused of squandering. Of course, the manager gets fired. While there’s no evidence given of the squandering, the dishonest manager doesn’t dispute the charges. Instead he concocts a scheme to protect himself for when he is tossed out onto the street. He reduces the debt of some of his clients in the hope they’ll return the favor of mercy for when he is in need very shortly. And manager gambles on a clever idea because he has nothing to lose. He cannot lose more than his job and he has no other prospects that seem appealing. Yet when the manager is brought before his master, the rich man, the master commends the dishonest manager for his shrewd actions of forgiving the debts. He restores and entrusts the scheming servant once again. The dishonest man is forgiven, all because he acts shrewdly according to the master.

This is where everything starts falling apart for us. This is where it becomes a little tricky in figuring out what this parable means. There are a couple of ways to look at this. At first glance, it may be that we need to be more like the rest of the world, sly and clever. Then again, maybe this is about making friends at any cost, even dishonest ones. On the other hand, maybe this is about trust and servitude. We must be trustworthy to enter the kingdom of God. We must serve only one master. It’s all more than a little confusing. Be clever, but trustworthy. Be dishonest, but honest. The confusion is not only ours. The manager himself seems to have no idea that his master will respond the way he does. This parable defies our notions of right and wrong to the core. Why would the Master commend the selfish and dishonest manager? The setting of this parable beings to provide a clue.

Back in Jesus' day, land was owned by families and clans. Communities relied on each other by doing business with each other. If someone in the family had to sell their land another family member was obligated to buy it. If one family couldn't make ends meet relatives were expected to help out. Maintaining relationships with neighbors/friends wasn't just polite, it was a necessity of life. Sounds familiar? Like any small town or rural community or even any church community around here. Things haven't changed much in two thousand years. Still today, family and land often go hand in hand. If you grew up in a small town like I did you probably know what I'm talking about! The importance of knowing your neighbors is a given. You might buy groceries from your next-door neighbor, have a relative as your nurse, vote for your best friend for town council. Everyone's interconnected. The only way to keep from wasting your resources is to work together and to help each other out. And that's the real problem of the parable. Our confusion is about the master's response in commending a dishonest manager. Commending selfishness and to restore a squanderer to his job. We assume that the manager's wasting his master's property not putting it to its full potential. Let's put it this way, the manager's not the local friendly corner store owner who lets his customers pay what and when they can. Instead, he's a squeeze-blood-from-a-stone kind of guy. A "make-him-an-offer-he-can't-refuse" kind of guy. If you owe 100 barrels, you're going to pay 100. The idea of reducing debt doesn't come until **after** the selfish servant is fired from his job. According to our definition of squandering by generously forgiving debts and not collecting full value, the manager doesn't actually waste his master's property, until after he's fired.

So what in the wide, wide world of sports is going on here? Well, let's take a breath, step back for a moment, and talk a bit about context. This parable comes along in the Gospel of Luke right after the parables of the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son. It comes right after three parables where God squanders His time, attention and care for the sake of the lost. God turns the idea of squandering on its head. To God, land, resources and money are squandered when they're **hoarded**, kept to oneself. And holding onto to what you own, collecting full value at any cost? Now, **that's** wastefulness to God. The master doesn't fire the manager for not producing enough but for holding on too tight. How opposite of the way we think.

When we first heard this parable today there was an easily missed cue at the beginning. The first words that are spoken are, "There was a rich man." WE often think that this parable is about the dishonest manager but it's really about the generous and self-giving rich man. The rich man who lavishly gives away his time and resources as well as his forgiveness. We're so stuck thinking about what this parable means for us and what it tells us what we must do and how we must act that we cannot really see what is happening so simply, forgiveness. We're so stuck we can't see who it's really about. God. God doesn't praise the servant's dishonest and shrewd motives but the action of **forgiveness**. God praises the manager for wise action. God is the rich and forgiving Master. And because God chooses grace and mercy above all, forgiveness abounds for the servant, the debtors, for us. God squanderingly gives forgiveness away for free.

It's different for us. For us, it's hardwired in our brains, in our very beings, that we should take what we believe is owed us, that we should make sure we receive 100% value. In our world, the "real world", a debt of 100 jugs of olive oil wouldn't be reduced to 50. Rather we'd make sure that when the debt is finally paid it would be 150 in return. A debt of 100 containers of wheat wouldn't be reduced to 80, rather 120 would be paid in return. We're so quick to assume that selfish motivations are being commended that we cannot see that the rich man praises the shrewd actions of forgiveness, grace, and mercy.

I heard a story recently that I'd like to share with you. It's called "Red Marbles" and was written by W. E. Petersen. A woman was at the corner grocery store buying some potatoes. She noticed a small boy, ragged but clean, hungrily appraising a basket of freshly picked apples. Seeing this, she couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller, the store owner, and the little boy. "Hi Barry, how are you today?" "Hi Mr. Miller. I'm fine, thank you. Just admiring them apples. They sure look good." "They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?" "Fine. Getting' stronger all the time." "Good. Anything I can help you with?" "No, Sir. Just admiring them apples." "Would you like to take some home?" asked Mr. Miller. "No, Sir. Got nothin' to pay for them with." "Well, do you have anything to trade me for some of them?" "I got my prize marble here." "Well, let me see it" said Mr. Miller. "Here it is," said the boy handing over the marble. "She's a dandy," said Mr. Miller, "The thing is – this one's blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one at home?" "Not exactly, but almost." "Tell you what," said Mr. Miller, "Take this basket of apples home with you and next time you stop by, bring me that red marble." "Sure will. Thanks Mr. Miller." Mrs. Miller, who'd been standing nearby came over to help me. Smiling, she said "There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are from poor families. Jim just loves to bargain with them for apples, tomatoes, or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one the next time they come to the store." The woman left the store smiling impressed with Mr. Miller. Not long after, she moved away but never forgot what she'd witnessed that day. Years later, she found herself back in that small town. While there, she learned that Mr. Miller had died. She went to the viewing and when she got there she stood in line to meet Mrs. Miller and offer her sympathy. Just in front of her were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two were well-groomed and looked very professional. They approached Mrs. Miller as she stood by her husband's casket. Each of the young men hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her and moved on to the casket. She watched as each young man stopped briefly and placed their hands over the hand of the deceased man. When the woman met Mrs. Miller she told her who she was and that she remembered what'd happened in their store all those years ago about her husband's bartering for marbles. With tears in her eyes, Mrs. Miller said, "Those 3 young men were the boys I told you about. They told me how they appreciated what Jim did for them. They told me that they'd come to pay their debt. We were never wealthy," Mrs. Miller confided, "but right now, Jim would consider himself the richest man in the world." Mrs. Miller lifted the hand of her deceased husband. Resting underneath were three exquisitely shiny red marbles.

This parable like the ones before, the ones about the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son, is really about a radical backward upside-down God. A God who believes in rejoicing with the found and who believes in the bad business practice of giving away God's most precious resources for free, of giving away forgiveness, grace and mercy.

While we're busy getting 100% value, trying to squeeze blood from a stone, God is spending lavishly to save us when all seems lost, and this is the radical business practice of God. God who calls hoarding squandering. God who gathers us all in by giving Himself away. God who is about forgiveness existing in the world, no matter the reason, no matter the season. We thought this parable was about waste but instead we find that it's about the upside economy of the Kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen