

September 18, 2022 Rev. Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray. Let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. As we approach your Word, may we be ready to receive the message you intend for us today. Amen.

Our scripture for today comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 16, verses 1 through 13. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

16 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. ² 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.’ ³ 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. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷ 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.’ ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ “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. ¹¹ If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ 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.”

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

To start bluntly, this is a hard parable. It’s confusing. There’s a lot going on. And once you piece it together, this parable seems to contradict what Jesus has taught us. Taught his disciples.

For Jesus tells us here in this parable to be like the shrewd manager, to use other’s wealth to make friends of our own. It all is a bit baffling.

We know and love parables. They are an essential part of Jesus' ministry and his chosen method of teaching. A parable can be described as a grassroots lesson connecting the ordinariness of life with the extraordinary nature of God.

And yet this parable pushes back against simple interpretation in that neat and nice definition. It undoes the common notion that the parables are simply nice stories about commendable people whom we ought to imitate.

But before we get into all of that we must first break through the barrier of confusion that surrounds this parable.

In order to have a firmer grasp on what is going on here we need to know a little bit about 1st century Palestinian economics.

Brian McLaren gives a good basic understanding of these economics. He tells us that, as with the whole of the gospels, the entire story of Jesus' life and the early church ...it is all set within the backdrop of the Roman occupation of Israel/Palestine.

This story is no exception. When the Romans would come in and conquer and occupy land, they would do two things: exploit natural resources and exploit the labor of the people. They would do this primarily through excessive taxation.

The poor farmers in Galilee had resources that the Romans needed. Olive oil and wheat. So instead of fairly paying these farmers for their crops, thus making the farmers rich too, or at least no longer poor, they tax them heavily.

So heavily that rich people down in the south, in Judea, would swoop in. They would offer to pay the taxes in exchange for the deed to the farmer's land.

But hey, they would let the farmer stay on the land as a tenant farmer and give part of the crop and its profit back to the now rich landowner. It was a system that made the rich richer, and the poor poorer.

Where have we seen that before?

Now the manager – he was hired by the landowner to go to the tenant farms and collect a cut of the profits. In all likelihood, within the parable most of us are probably the tenant farmer. Stuck in the middle. Not overly rich, not overly poor.

In the middle with enough to get by, but probably not much more. So, knowing all of that – this parable becomes a bit more accessible. We have this manager who is accused of squandering away the landowner's property. To be clear – we don't know if this accusation is just.

SO, the landowner tells the manager he is going to be fired. So get my books in order before you go.

The manager is not rich. He needs this job. He can't work in the fields. He doesn't want to beg – but he needs means to live. He probably has a family to support and protect.

So, what does he do? He goes to these tenant farmers, and he reduces their debt. He reduces what they need to pay him to take back to the landowner.

These landowners were taking advantage of their farmers. It's important to note that charging interest on loans was forbidden in the bible because it exploited the vulnerable poor. Exodus 22:25-27

Within the loans the farmers took from the rich in order to stay on their land, excessive and unjust interest rates were hidden.

Wealthy landlords in Jesus' day created ways to charge interest under other guises, often hiding interest by rolling it into the principal.

According to Barbara Rossing, the hidden interest rates appear to have been about 25% for money and 50% for Goods.

And on top of these interest rates, the manager collecting the payment would have charged even more to take a cut for himself.

Thus, this manager goes to the tenant farmers and reduces one by 50% and the other by 20%. In doing so, he could simply be taking away the excessive interest, or forgoing his own cut.

Making them pay back simply what they originally borrowed, and nothing more. It's this shrewdness that the rich landowner surprisingly commends.

And even more surprisingly, it's this shrewdness Jesus tells us, the children of the light, that we need to have.

Having this background doesn't solve everything, however. Because ultimately, there are a lot of things we don't know.

It could be possible that the accusation against the manager was in fact true. And we don't know the manager's true motives for reducing the payment. Was it truly to alleviate the overwhelming debt from the farmers in an act of goodness once realizing the unjust system?

Doing so upon realizing that he, himself, was so expendable in this system that keeps the rich richer and the poor poorer that he was out in an instant, without even a chance to prove the accusations wrong.

Or maybe he was trying to selfishly make friends in a last-ditch effort to not be completely on his own after being fired. A last-ditch effort to cozy up to the people he very likely took advantage of too.

We don't know. Where does Jesus want us to see ourselves amid it all? We don't know.

I recently watched a movie called Hell or High Water, that came out in 2016. It's a western movie set in modern day west Texas.

It tells the story of two brothers who are trying to save their family cattle ranch from foreclosing. And to do this, they commit several small scale and hard to trace robberies from different branches of the very same bank foreclosing on them.

They only take enough to pay off the loan on their land. Land that has been in their family for generations.

Law enforcement thinks all the small robberies likely aren't connected and since such a small amount is taken it isn't worth their time investigating. Insurance will cover the loss. Except for one Texas ranger.

He suspects these are calculated, and cunning robberies committed by the same people. And he is determined to find them.

On the surface it's a good movie. It's an excellent story with actors that bring it to life, all shot in such a captivating way. And when it ends – there is no real hero or villain.

You're left to wonder.

But in that wondering, wondering who is in the right or if they were wrong, you come to realize that this movie is so much more than just a modern day western with a good story and talented actors.

Small, family farms, are a dying breed. As large-scale farms continue to grow larger and to monopolize the market and put small farms out of business, the owners of these small farms – farms that have likely been in their family for generations – turn to the bank.

They take out loans to save their farm because farming is expensive. It requires a lot of capital and investment for workers and equipment before you reap a profit.

So, at the beginning of the season, farmers will take out loans to pay for the seed, fertilizers, workers, etc – then hope they produce enough to pay back the loans and make a profit.

And more and more, because the competition is so high from the large farms, they rarely do. And the banks lay on the interest excessively and only give what is necessary – no more.

And as the cycle goes on, sure enough the farmers cannot pay, and they foreclose.

I grew up in an area with a lot of small family farms. One of my best friends grew up on a dairy farm that had been in her family for a few generations. Just a few years ago her dad had to finally sell the farm. Thus, this movie is a bit more cunning than I initially gave it credit for.

Are the brothers really too far out of line to take from the bank that trapped their family in a system of poverty? Banks claiming to help but knowing full well that these loans would never be able to be repaid. Or are the brothers *shrewd*?

Accepting the fate that working honestly within the system is fundamentally impossible because the very system itself is built upon dishonesty? I don't know.

What I do know is that because of this movie, I've spent more time thinking about how banks and large farming corporations are putting small scale farms out of business.

Doing so in a way that these small-scale farmers really see no other option but to accept the fate that they will eventually either lose or sell their farms. And I think about that every time I drive through Watsonville and see the large, massive farms.

Perhaps it's the same with this parable. Maybe Jesus didn't want it to be figured out nice and neatly. Maybe Jesus wanted us to be confused by it, to wrestle with it, so that we too would learn about this unjust economic system in first century Palestine that trapped these poor farmers while the rich exploited them for their own gains.

To make their own fortunes. To realize that two thousand years later... really nothing has changed.

To realize that the kingdom of God cannot take root and grow in an economic capitalist system that keep the rich rich in expense of the poor.

To realize that there is an economic system in the kingdom of God.

One that is not based on profit, but in equality. where relationships and justice are more important than money.

To achieve that here on earth...I think Jesus is calling us to be a bit shrewd.

The parable ends by saying you cannot serve God and wealth.

It's a bold statement. And it's meant to be.

But the reality of life here and now means we do need money to live a just life. A life with dignity. A life spent serving God's kingdom. So, what do we do?

I think the path becomes clearer when we see perhaps wealth or money in and of itself isn't the villain. It's when we use God to serve money, rather than money to serve God, that idolatry seeps in.

Recently, the owner and founder of Patagonia made national news when he announced that he and his family were irrevocably giving up their shares and control and ownership of the company. Effectively giving up the family's billion plus dollar fortune.

Instead, ownership would now go to a newly formed trust that would give all profits to nonprofit organizations fighting climate change.

It stunned the world because it was a completely unprecedented move.

They were even doing it in such a way that they wouldn't get a tax break – meaning they would pay even more just to make this possible. But they did it.

The owner was always averse to wealth – and struggled greatly about what to do with this company that had made him so rich. So, he gave it up. And used his current wealth and all the profits to come to fight for a better earth.

To be a true steward of the earth, taking care of God's creation. About this move – he said: “Hopefully this will influence a new form of capitalism that doesn't end up with a few rich people and a bunch of poor people.”

I think this is the shrewdness we are called to. To work within the world we have – the economic system we have – to play it against itself so that God's kingdom can take root.

This parable is baffling. Be baffled by it. Don't rush to figure it out nice and neatly.

Instead let it stir wonder, let it fuel action, and let it help you see clearly the social systems we live – and question whether they can be in God's kingdom.

Amen.