

Building Community

Last week we heard about the awesome and sometimes even terrifying gift we have been given, the gift of choice.

This week in the parable of the dishonest manager, also known as the parable of the shrewd manager or the unjust steward, we hear about some choices that he has made.

This is a story that sounds rather odd to North American ears and one where there is little consensus among the theologians about its meaning.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples, some of whom were fishermen. Likely there were others hanging around who were farmers or farmworkers.

We have a rich man who owns lots of land; enough that he has a manager to look after it. Typically, tenant farmers would rent a piece of land to grow crops for themselves. Rent was usually charged in the form of a given amount of produce, in baskets of wheat or jugs of oil. The tenant would owe that much produce even if they could not produce it – may be frost or drought or flood would ruin the crop. If the tenant farmer did not grow enough to pay the owner, feed his family and have enough seed for the next year then he would have to borrow. Tenant farmers often ended up in perpetual debt as the owner lent the farmer seed for the next year.

Jewish law forbade anyone from charging interest; however, people are creative and they found ways around it. If you were loaned 50 baskets of wheat, you may have to pay back 80 or 100 baskets.

It is a recipe for spiralling into servitude and permanent indebtedness. Many of the disciples were fishermen, and they would pay rent on the boat. If they did not catch enough fish to make the payments, then they too would be caught in the same web. They would understand the plight of the farmers.

The owner has his manager collect the payments, and it seems that not all the payments were getting into the owner's warehouse. Needless to say, the owner is not happy with the manager, asks for an accounting before firing him.

The manager has been rather used to his cushy, comfy office job; his hands are soft, and his back is weak. He would not survive long in the fields doing the back breaking work of planting, weeding or harvesting. He is too proud to beg. He has some choices to make.

He comes up with a creative solution. He will reduce the bills of the tenant farmers to the original amounts, he will remove the added interest.

The rich man cannot complain to the temple authorities because he is now receiving all that he is due. The farmers do not have to pay the burdensome interest.

When the rich man rides into town to fire the manager, the farmers and families are happy to see him. Either he looks like a hero for reducing the payments, or he looks like a scoundrel and cheat who has been caught. Either way the locals are happy.

Caught between the proverbial rock and hard place, the owner has little choice but commend the manager because he had acted shrewdly.

The manager, who was likely an outcast from the community because he worked for the owner and enforced the very high interest payments, is now welcome back into the community

because everyone has received considerable relief, not having to pay the unlawful interest payments. The manager may not be able to work but at least now he is welcome back into the community. He will not starve as Jewish and Arab culture of the area made important to share food with the hungry.

The manager used questionable methods in a dishonest system. The manager had “cheated” the cheating system.

The manager has also used what he could to give those in his community a fighting chance. It is a choice that will dividends in the future.

To be clear, I do not think for a moment that Jesus encourages theft – of any sort. And I do not think that Jesus is suggesting that bribery and gifts is a good way to make friends.

There is some praise for the manager choosing to use the money to benefit the tenant farmers, instead of hoarding money for himself. Jesus’ advice is to use the availability or access to money to make friends, to build relationships, to be in community.

The good thing, the real gift, the grace is the building and strengthening of the community. Relationships are of much greater value than money or property or stuff.

At the end of the day, when troubles hit the hardest, it is friends, family and community who will help you get through it.

Yesterday, 10 members of St Andrew’s gathered with others from around the Deanery and took part in the “Mapping the Ground We Stand On” workshop. We stepped onto a giant map laid out on the parish hall floor at Holy Saviour in Waterloo, and we explored our own ancestral journey alongside the many Indigenous nations that have lived-and continue to live-on this land we know as Canada, and they call Turtle Island. It is an interactive experience that invited us to reflect on the interwoven histories and ongoing relationship of Indigenous Nations and settlers.

Afterwards, as I reflected on the experience, I understood a little better the choices that the Indigenous Nations have made to rebuild their families and their communities. Sometimes having to get around settler-imposed systems that at best have not helped and at worst have been detrimental.

They understand the value of family and community. They also understand that community goes far beyond the human beings around them and includes the animals, birds, insects, flowers, herbs, trees, rocks and water. Their community includes the earth and all of creation.

Maybe we can choose to learn from the Indigenous Nations and include creation in our community.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Readings: Luke 16:1-13