

Fifteenth Week After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Street Smarts and Stewardship: The Crooked Manager and Us"

Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13

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Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Such a very strange parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel! It's called the parable of the **dishonest** steward or the **crooked** manager. We would understandably guess that Jesus wouldn't want us to follow in **that** guy's footsteps! But we start scratching our heads when the owner from whom the steward has **stolen**, the owner who is **firing** him, commends him for his shrewdness, his savvy, his street smarts in making deals with various debtors to prevent a total crash landing after he's sent packing. Here's how this hard-to-understand story is paraphrased in *The Message*. Jesus says:

8-9 "Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior." (Luke 16)

I don't know about you, but I hear the word "shrewd" and there's something a little off. If someone is shrewd in business, I tend to think they're not doing anything illegal, but maybe I should check the contract extra closely. When we're talking about brainstorming new ways to share our faith and proclaim the Gospel, I'm more comfortable with words like "creative" and "sharp," as in intelligent, cutting edge. Jesus says, "Put as much effort into building the Kingdom as you do into building your career, your family, your portfolio."

"Who's got time to do all that??" we ask. So our Lord Jesus tells us, "Get your priorities straight!" God gives us 24 hours in a day. God created us and designed us to **need** time to sleep,

eat and play, as well as work. God doesn't ask more of us than is humanly possible. If we're coming up short, lacking time to cover the essentials and still stay healthy and happy, we need a more balanced life. We need to change something. If we don't know what it is, the Holy Spirit is ready and glad to enlighten us, **if** we're open to input. **If** we're willing to make changes. **If** we're willing to do less in order to be more. It'd be easier if there were pure junk cluttering up our schedule, activities that obviously don't do us or anyone else any good. It's much harder when our crowded schedule is full of worthwhile, good commitments. Mae West was wrong, though, when she said, "Too much of a good thing is a good thing." Too much of a good thing is actually a bad thing. As the little book *Growing God* says: the garden of our life may be full of beautiful things, but if there are **too** many, God will not be one of them. Weed your garden. Prune your life.

It's interesting that Jesus moves from the parable about shrewdness and using Madison Avenue creativity and first-class smarts to share the Gospel, to faithfulness. (*"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much."* Luke 16:10a) Then He pivots immediately to the topic of money:

*No worker can serve two bosses:
He'll either hate the first and love the second
or adore the first and despise the second.
You can't serve both God and the Bank. (Luke 16:13, The Message)*

The crooked manager threw loyalty to his boss overboard, thinking he was serving himself instead, but in reality making the Bank his boss – and suffering for it. Hopefully you didn't miss the pure sarcasm in Jesus' advice:

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. (Luke 16:9)

In other words, "Good luck to you if you're counting on your ill-gotten gains bailing you out of whatever hellhole you find yourself in once you die!"

The crooked manager in the story had a good job, he made a decent living, but he wanted more and decided the easy way to get it was taking what belonged to somebody else. He stole because he was greedy. Greed may not seem like too great a sin compared to adultery or murder, but it can lead to both. It also says a lot that greed is one of the seven **deadly** sins.

Heads up: each weekend we should look for a connection between the first lesson and the Gospel, because there's usually one there. There sure is this week. Poor Amos the prophet. He was tasked with telling the people in the northern kingdom of Israel that they were going to be overrun by the Assyrians who would carry many of them off into captivity. ('Ever heard of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel? It's the Assyrians who made them disappear.) And why was the nation going to be punished?? Because the people had their priorities all wrong. Because how to make the next buck consumed their thoughts, even on what was supposed to be their day of soul refreshment. They went to synagogue all right, they didn't **do** work on the Sabbath, but they **thought** about work, and calculated what their next move would be as soon as they were open again for business. Amos warned that God was going to punish them because they feathered their own nests and threw the poor out of theirs. The LORD accused the people of:

*...buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat. (Amos 8:6)*

They rigged the system so that the balances were tipped in their own favor, they used false measures to cheat the customer, they orchestrated loans in their own favor so they could never be repaid, and they **sold** what was left over after the threshing of the wheat, grain which God mandated should be **donated** to the poor (like in the story of Ruth & Boaz). This is how one Bible commentator describes the sorry situation:

The same words for buying and selling are used whether the object of that activity is grain, wheat, trash mixed with the wheat – or human beings. They, too, are “bought for silver.” The poor and the needy are treated just like trash.¹

Earlier in the Book of Amos, he blasts those who work in the courts and pervert justice. The reason the words of the prophets of old are included in Scripture is that God still speaks through them to us in our day. Human sin looks the same over the ages. There is a message here for our time, for our nation, for our community. There is a fresh indictment of abuse of the immigrant and neglect of the impoverished; there is a call to repent and live.

Through Amos the LORD pointed out to the people that they were living in two different spheres: their religious faith and their everyday life. Their attitude was, “Ne’er the twain shall meet.” God said “No! Your faith should permeate your life, it should be **a part of**, not **apart from**, your life. Don’t worship Me on the weekend and then worship the Bank during the week.”

Everything we have is from God. Some blessings are obviously from on high: sun and sand, birth and breath. There are other blessings for we have worked hard, including studying for a career, earning a paycheck. But ultimately it’s **all** from God. Going back to the parable, we are managers, not owners. God has appointed us “stewards” of the natural world, of our community, of our lives. Good stewardship requires brain smarts **and** heart smarts. We are to be prudent **and** we are called to step out in faith. We are to provide for our families, but also to care for the needy. It’s not rocket science. We are to love God above all else and our neighbors as ourselves. It may not always seem like it in the moment, but this is the surest path to joy, now and later. Amen

¹James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah (Interpretation)*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), p. 121.

