

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

What Will I Do?

15th Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 22, 2019

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Introduction to Scripture

The story you are about to hear is not in the Children's Story Bible. It is commonly called the "Parable of the Dishonest Manager," and when you hear it, I think you will know why. It is confusing. Far better minds than mine have declared it to be incomprehensible at worst, or simply odd at best. Mostly, we try to ignore this story which became an embarrassment for the Church at least since Julian the apostate used the parable to assert the inferiority of the Christian faith and its founder, Jesus.ⁱ

Yet here it is, our lectionary gospel text for this Sunday. My first instinct was to run from it. We have four lectionary texts from which to choose. Surely God had a message for me to preach from the other ones. But God had Her way with me, and said to me in so many words, "I'm not letting you off that easy this time." So here we are. Last May, I did hear an angle on this text from Brian McLaren, author, speaker, activist and public theologian, which helped snap it into focus for me. He began by suggesting a new title for it. Rather than calling it, "The Parable of the Dishonest Manager," we should call it, "The Manager who Changed Sides."ⁱⁱ

Let me reset the scene for us. Remember last week's story in Luke 15 where the religious elites were grumbling about Jesus' choice of company at table with the tax collectors and sinners? We're still there, the Pharisees and scribes are still listening and now we also have disciples in the mix. Jesus is clearly not finished with them, the religious elites, after his first three parables about the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son.

He's really just getting warmed up. And he's turning up the heat. Unlike the lost sheep, lost coin and the lost son parables--this one does not end up with a party. This one ends with a stern warning about God and wealth, or God and *mammon*, the Greek word for wealth. Situated in Luke 16, we can hear Jesus reaching into the taproot of the prophetic tradition, with Amos' words in his ears and the cross in his mind's eye, looming ever closer on the horizon. Jesus knows his time on earth is growing short—and they still aren't getting it. Are we?

Sermon

Never mind how he got there, the manager changed sides. He was a middle-class person who saw the light in his moment of crisis. He realized, "I mean nothing to the rich man and the people above me. I will make friends with the people below me." A little context will help us here: Rome's strategy at that time was to invade, occupy, extract and exploit. Tax the poor and reward the rich. Our guy, the manager, had been playing the role of middleman, a middle-class guy dependent on the rich people. Kind of doing what they did on a smaller scale. But when he gets cut off from his part in the food chain, he is faced with a moment of decision. Kind of like the prodigal son when he's squandered all his father's property and is face down in the mud, literally feeding the pigs. Never mind how he got there, it's his next move, his moment of awakening on which the story turns.

What will it take for us to turn? God sent prophets like Amos to his chosen people on the brink of political ruin in 760 BCE. Amos tried to wake them up, and realign his people with shocking poetry like in our first scripture lesson we heard Isaac read: "You, that trample on the needy...buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals." Disaster was looming because of their social injustice and religious

arrogance. Amos' words and warning were not radical. These days even the word "justice" has become associated with one side of the political spectrum more than the other. The thing is, Amos' cry for justice was actually a conservative plea. He was calling Israel back in alignment with what God had revealed from the beginning. But his cry fell on deaf ears. The Northern kingdom, or Israel, would fall to Samaria in about 60 years.

In our Luke text, here's Jesus, headed for Jerusalem, still facing the same problem. Religious elites more in line with Rome than with God's call, God's way, yes, God's side. Religious elites more in line with the god called "Mammon" in Greek, or wealth, as it is translated in our version. Sucked into the idea that money is the value maker, that mammon makes the person, mammon gives us worth. Today in conversation about our finances we are asked, "What is your net worth?" It is very easy to get the two mixed up or turned around. Hopefully we know better. But do we act on that deeper wisdom?

Take out a dollar bill or a coin from your pocket or purse... Now, will the ushers please come forward and you can put it in the offering plate. *Just kidding.* Please hold your bill or your coin in your hand and look for the sentence on it that says something about God. Did you find it? Read it, even if you know what it says. "In God we trust." Isn't it strange that "we write "In God We Trust" on the god that we really trust.ⁱⁱⁱ It seems ironic this phrase is printed on the very object that, if we are being really honest, we just might trust more, love a little (or a lot) more, than God. It took the prodigal son to be face down in the muck, it took the dishonest steward the loss of his job and place in the world to see it. Perhaps we can do better. We're here, thinking about this parable. That's good. OK, you can put your money back in your pocket now.

While we are being honest. These two scriptures compel me to ask you: What is our love of money doing to this land right now? This land that we love?

- 130 people a day die from opioid overdose, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.^{iv} That's more than everyone in this sanctuary. Dying Every day. I can't help but think that serving mammon, serving wealth, before or instead of God, has something to do with it.
- Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, this past summer in the U.S.A. we had 26 mass shootings in 18 states, that left 126 people dead. None of these were in a school, since it was summer time. During a on gun violence I attended at the capital in Madison this past Wednesday, a teacher on the panel told us that her school had to be evacuated one morning because of a shooting threat. Three days after the evacuation, one of her students said to her with relief, "we made it to 10:00 a.m.!" We know we have a problem when a child is relieved to get through half a morning a school without hearing or dodging bullets. With the current epidemic of suicides by gun, domestic violence involving guns, and mass shootings, we now have broad bipartisan support – 89% of Americans, and 81% of Wisconsin residents support background checks for gun purchases online and at gun shows. I can't help but think the the love of money is at the root of this gap between public will and our ability to pass laws that reflect it.
- I believe the way we have managed to politicize the scientific reality of climate change can also be drilled down to this choice to serve money first. We used to call the care of our environment conservation—because the call is to conserve the good earth, the only earth that God has given us to manage. I can't help but think the love of money is at the heart of what has turned this clarion call to conserve this earth into something else.

Just one more:

- 821 million people woke up this morning and will go to sleep hungry today all around the globe. Including right here in the U.S where 12 million children are food insecure. I can't help but think

the love of money more than God is keeping these people hungry in Marshfield and all over the world. Especially when we know there is enough food on this planet to feed everyone.

Wealth is not the problem. It's the love of it. The serving of it over God. The wealthier we are, the harder it is to choose God over wealth. That is true for all of us. Here is an important distinction we discussed at our Wednesday "Happy Hour" Bible Study. No, You can't serve God *and* wealth, as Jesus said, but you can serve God *with* wealth. That is our call, we who are blessed to be food secure and shelter secure. This is our time on this planet when we have a chance to change sides and help the world to bend just a little farther along that long, long, arc of the moral universe toward justice. This is our chance to realign ourselves on God's side.

What am I talking about? Here's the thing: God is partisan. God has a side. And God's side is neither Republican or Democrat. Nor is God's side even exclusively Christian. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has written, "God is clearly not a Christian. His concern is for all his children. There is a Jewish story, which says that soon after the episode of the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, while the Israelites were celebrating, God accosted them and demanded, "How can you rejoice when my children have drowned?"^v Yes: the gospel's partisanship is on behalf of the excluded and the oppressed.^{vi} The prophets also share this partisanship, as well

What will we do? Whose side are we on? President Abraham Lincoln famously responded to a person who asked him if God was on his side in the Civil war, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." As Paul wrote from prison, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) Paul's words can give us the courage that we can make the right choice. But the question for us today, is not, "can I." When it comes to serving God or wealth, the question is: What *will* I do?"

ⁱ Eugene Peterson, "Gospel Rascals," *Christian Century*, October 2, 2008, p.32.

ⁱⁱ Brian McLaren, Sermon on Luke 16:1-31, "Scaring the Hell Out of Rich Folk," preached May 15, 2019 at Festival of Homiletics, Minneapolis, MN. The first paragraph of the sermon also includes ideas from Brian's sermon.

ⁱⁱⁱ This sentence is a direct quote from my notes of Brian McLaren's sermon. The idea to have the congregation take out money from their wallets (he used credit cards) was also Brian's.

^{iv} "Church Opens Door to Syringe Exchange," by Yonat Shimron, *Christian Century*, August 14, 2019, p.13.

^v Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *God is Not A Christian And Other Provocations*, (HarperOne: New York, NY, 2011), p.12.

^{vi} Michael Kinnamon, "What is Church Unity For?", *Christian Century*, August 14, 2019, p. 32.