

We are in chapter 16 of Luke’s gospel today. Back in chapter 9 Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem, the center of power, predicting that he will be executed by those powers. As he sets out, he begins to empower his disciples to heal and teach and as he does so he teaches them to pray: To pray that God’s kingdom would be made real and we know forgiveness as we forgive the debts of others.

In chapter 12 as Jesus and his disciples are on the way, a rich young man appeals to Jesus’ authority and asks him to tell the rich young man’s brother that he should divide the family inheritance with him. Jesus cautions that rich young man to be careful and that ultimately one’s life is not measured by the abundance of our possessions. And then Jesus goes on, over the next 7 chapters before he reaches Jerusalem, to tell a number of stories – at least 6 in fact - about where we go wrong when we put the love of money over the love of God and the way this love calls us to.

In chapter 15 and then here in chapter 16 Jesus tells two stories, back-to-back, of individuals who squander the money that is under their care. The first is the story of the prodigal son who squanders the early inheritance he has demanded of his father and who, out of options and suffering as a result, decides he must swallow his pride and return home to beg forgiveness. The other is this story we read today – the story of a manager, or a steward - who has been reported for squandering the money that his position requires he handle for his master, and who must also come up with a plan for survival.

Often a preacher will ask a congregation when considering the first of these stories, the story of the prodigal: Where do you see yourself in the story? Are you the father who has been betrayed? Are you the son lost and broken? Or are you the dutiful yet jealous brother? Where do you see yourself, the preacher will sometimes ask, and what does this text tell you about where God shows up and what God requires of you?

I have yet to hear a preacher ask where one sees oneself in this story of the dishonest manager. Even though today’s text is of a similar structure with three characters – the master, the manager, and those who owe the master money – and

deals with similar themes – the consequences of failing to steward money entrusted to us. We just don't seem to want to get too close to this text.

And I can understand why. The first story is more clear-cut. It's about family and we can understand to a degree the decisions made. We can understand, we might yearn for, the fatherly affection and forgiveness that is the resolution. And there is a resolution that makes sense, that provides a way through.

But this other story is about the marketplace, and the lines are less clear. There doesn't seem to be a satisfactory resolution and perhaps most disconcertingly it is not clear what kind of behavior Jesus is commending and what kind of behavior is he condemning. The manager is dishonest yet seems to come off well in Jesus eyes. Is he asking that we be like this manager and deal dishonestly with others? But I think we should look a little closer, see if we might in fact be in this story, and what it offers in terms of a faithful way through.

Jesus lived in Roman Palestine under Herod's rule. Economically it was mainly agrarian with some herding, mining, and fishing. The development of agriculture and advances in plowing allowed large tracts of land to be farmed but the bounty of the land was not extracted for the farmer's benefit or the benefit of society, but rather it was farmed and then confiscated by a small ruling aristocracy.

These folks made up about 1 – 2% of the population and they enforced their position through the power of standing armies, priests loyal to power, bureaucrats, and technicians who protected and administered their interests. The majority of the people fell in the lower 75% of the population, mostly peasant farmers and fisherman, and they were held in their place serving those higher up through a system of tenant farming, slavery, and crippling debt.

The very wealthy in this society operated essentially as loan-sharks, loaning those below what they needed to survive and then using exorbitant interest rates of up to 50% to amass more land and disinherit peasants from their family land.

The system of debt holding was managed by people like our steward today. He was as a slave in this system that was not designed to care for him either, and more often than not these managers would use the power they had to extract a little

extra from those indebted to his master for his own pockets – this on top of payments to the landlord, and additional payment for Rome – their occupiers.

We might try to keep this story at arm's length but the people listening to Jesus could not. They knew the players. They were one of the players – probably one of those in the lower 75% or perhaps someone higher up in this system. They would have complicated responses to this complicated story.

Many would have, for understandable reasons, cheered this scheme of the manager to cut debts – a temporary release that they would themselves yearn for. They would have a whole bunch of feelings related to that manager. Perhaps there was some understanding around his desire to make some money while working within this odious system. Maybe some would feel a little pity for his being found out, or maybe a little glee. I imagine there were nods of understanding, if not a little scorn, at his weighing of his options and his decision that in the absence of a rich father to return to he must ingratiate himself with those on the bottom of this system. Perhaps there was even a tug at that gut level knowledge that really building community and sticking with those on the underside is the only way through in a system designed to eat you up for profit. And as for the Lord, I am sure the blow to him was seen as a win – just desserts and a smart way through. There would undoubtedly have been nervousness at the telling of the story – worry about rocking the boat. Such stories are dangerous in a system that relies on power and compliance.

The point is that the people would know the complexity that this story represents. They would feel deeply the lack of easy answers. While they might agree with us and with Jesus that this manager did a dishonest thing, the bigger point is that he was operating in a deeply dishonest system. He was working to cover his back within a system that fails everyone involved. It was an economics where the poor get poorer, the rich may get richer, but they also get no rest, even in their luxury, as they work to always stay ahead, and the middle – well the middle has to figure out somehow what to do in the squeeze just to survive. The point is that there is simply no peace in ways of being that prioritizes money over the wellbeing of our neighbors and the flourishing of the land.

We, beloved, are in this story. We are in this story in that we too live in a complex and deeply unfair world full of dishonest wealth. The choices we and others make

are often beyond our 2-dimensional moralizing. Of course, there are some just some plain bad decisions, but there is much that is so much more complex than that.

As people of the way, Jesus says, we are not removed from this world. We are formed in it. Our faith doesn't remove us from it but sends us to it not to be dishonest, but to offer peace and hope amidst it. But we must not enter in naively and with easy answers but engage the complexity and figure out step by step how to walk a different way – a way that puts love and compassion and hope first over the love of money, a way that does not prioritize material goods over all else but that does speak clearly and truthfully, just as Jesus did, to the realities of our systems, systems that deprive folks of what they need to be well. A way that is a balm, a healing response in a hurting and complex world.

As I mentioned last week Session have been taking some time to reflect on the story of Calvary, who we have been and who we are, what brings us Joy and hope, and they have named some values - some particular ways of being that God calls us to. In the complexities of our world, it is good to state how it will be a balm, a healing and redemptive space, so we can return to ourselves when we need and so others can interpret and understand who we mean to be.

The first of these is that we commit ourselves to nurturing the spirit of God in and amongst us. This means specifically that we support spiritual well-being, and inspire thanksgiving, the love of God, God's peace through, communal prayer, worship, and the arts, by providing safe space to explore spirituality and a life of faith, by teaching spiritual practices and church traditions, inviting new ways of seeing God in their lives.

I pray you will see reflected in this value and the others I will share in coming weeks who Calvary has been and who we are called to be together. I pray you will find space to be inspired and to remember that you are loved and claimed by God in all your complexity, and that you will feel and know the deep peace of God – a peace that cannot be attained in money or wealth but that comes just because God made you and loves you. Be at peace, beloved, and engage the realities of the world in ways that people can see and know this peace in you. Amen