

15 Pentecost C

Amos 8:4-7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

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Grace and peace to you from Jesus who loves us.

This gospel reading is a ready invitation to jump into a pulpit-pounding sermon on giving. I could extol the tithing principle of Leviticus. I could wind a cord of guilt around you to squeeze until you flinch. I could chastise you into giving more...

Rest easy, I'm not going to employ any of those tactics.

Jesus did talk a lot about money. Really, when he does, he's revealing one of many things that tempt us away from God, and us from our created-good-selves. Money is a tool at our disposal, but as Jesus points out, we never want to find ourselves in a position of servitude under it.

Money holds a very high place in our world. I think this is the core of our confusion and distaste for the manager's actions in this passage from Luke. As good-god-fearing believers we don't dare to imagine that such *shrewdness* (as Jesus describes it) should be praiseworthy. We might label the manager's dishonest actions as confirmation of his shady character and the good reason he is fired. And his dishonesty is thereby justification, for a just punishment we anticipate. He deserves what's coming to him.

But judgment doesn't come. Retribution doesn't come. Punishment doesn't come. In shocking manner, Jesus' parable teaches, what for us is a counterintuitive response, but it is one perfectly aligned with the personhood of Christ.

Let me put it as simply as I can. Jesus' story upholds the manager's dishonesty, because *Jesus himself is dishonest*.

In this manager Jesus sees one who is ready to minimize the debt load on the master's clients – debt loads that were in all likelihood staggering, oppressive and inconducive to one's ability to thrive. The very fact that such debt loads are named is proof of a system of extremes of wealth and poverty. That isn't anything new, 700 years earlier Amos clearly outlined greed that trampled down people in need, that squeezed out every last coin from those in poverty just so

they could have a bit of wheat or something on the soles of their feet. Amos argues that food and clothing ought to be basic human rights.

And just what might Amos say to us? We cannot ignore the evidence of the continued gap between the peoples in our own neighbourhoods. There are abundant attitudes that view homelessness as a “problem,” the makeshift camps and cardboard shanties as an eyesore and views *those* people as scary, even *dangerous*. As in biblical times, they are modern day lepers, seemingly disfavored by God and to be kept at a distance. Not a lot has changed, ought we not then be prepared for the angry judgment of the prophet or even of Jesus?

But Jesus doesn't judge us for being part of a broken system, whether we are at the top or the bottom. Do you realize how remarkable that is? This is why I said earlier that Jesus upholds the manager's dishonesty, because *Jesus himself is dishonest*. We are not held accountable for the mistakes we make, or the ways we feed our egos, or for the greed we get stuck in, for our inattention to the environment, for the hurts we cause one another or any other myriad of misdeeds. Jesus stands by his commitment of love in the face of all that we do – never asking us to pay the penalty deserved, because he loves us. In the church we call this grace – which is the unbridled, un-understandable, unending forgiveness of the Holy One extended to all of Creation.

Still, before we consider this a free ticket to the status quo, or an opportunity for self-justification, there is a note of caution here. Grace can also be distorted into what it isn't. Grace does not mean that we can simply be dishonest in our dealings and get away with it. Grace does not mean we can continue to uphold unjust policies and practices with the expectation that all will be well in the end. If that's how we view it then it is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer named it, “cheap grace,” which isn't grace at all. This manager was praised because when he was confronted with his faults he didn't argue the validity of his practices, but, he had an epiphany. It was a life altering moment where, perhaps for the first time in a long time, he came face to face with what he had done and decides in a flash that it was time to change, time to make amends to the best of his ability, time to see the humanity of others – and so he changed his ways, using his position of privilege in its remaining hours for the benefit of others.

In a sense, Jesus was saying, it's never too late. He was opening the door for those listening that day, who were stuck in the love of money, to turn and love God instead. When opportunity arises for us to see and comprehend the consequences of our actions, that is the moment we can turn and change. In all that we do, Jesus teaches us to remember the whole of Creation, the whole of humanity and to turn our lives to the ways of justice, love and peace.

And so, the parable of the dishonest manager and Christ's praise for his actions forces us to view ourselves and relationships in a new way. We are to remember that rather than keeping tabs on who owes who what or where we are in social standing, that the gospel continually calls us to build relationships with others in every walk of life. And, the parable encourages imagination and creativity in doing so.

This call comes to us today in a season of returning to fall routines, in a post-COVID season, in a season of decline in the church that has stretched over the last 60 or so years. This moment belongs to us and the challenge belongs to us – how might we in our circumstances take up this mantle? Might we think outside the box as did the dishonest manager? We have permission to try new ventures and break old routines and expectations in order to respond to the needs of the world today.

Each of us has a place of belonging in this community and a role in nurturing it. Be encouraged to come back to worship in person, to take up a volunteer role, to join in group studies and events, and to encourage one another in the family of God. Share your gifts and talents, your ideas. Take the time to learn about one another, practice compassion, be generous, kind, and pursue justice – and not so that we will be favored and secure a place of honor or receive a reward or some recognition, or even that we might secure a place in heaven with the angels, but simply because Jesus loves us and we want to extend that love to others in generous gratitude. Amen.