

Sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. September 23, 2007
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Durham, NC Proper 20 Year C: Luke 16:1-13

This morning's Gospel lesson from Luke contains a most puzzling parable. We hope this little story about a rich man and his crooked manager has a point we can understand. The wonderful thing about parables is that they are puzzling. This one, in particular, often referred to as the parable of the unrighteous or dishonest manager, has a reputation among Bible scholars as being the most difficult to interpret of all Jesus' parables. And so I will now turn to our other lesson today from Paul's letter to Timothy... No, this inscrutable story has its hooks in us. I do not propose that we attempt to solve it but that we ponder it. No one interpretation will be adequate, but part of what Jesus seems to be getting at is the idea that a shrewd person looks for welcome rather than wealth. In God's economic system, welcoming relationships are more important than material wealth.

Let's review the story again. A rich man had a manager, and reports came to the rich man that this manager was wasting resources. Perhaps he was taking too many personal trips on the company camel, or maybe he was just bad at keeping the books. The rich man asks for the accounts and tells the manager he's fired. The manager is stuck. He is too weak to work as a laborer, and he is too proud to become a beggar. And chances are he will not be able to find another managerial post. So what does he do? He comes up with an interesting plan. He goes to the people who owe his boss some big debts and tells them to reduce their bills, one by 50% and another by 20%. He hopes that when he is out on the street, maybe his act of generosity will mean these debtors will show him some hospitality. Maybe they will welcome him into their homes. The rich man hears about this little trick, but instead of throwing the manager in jail for more dishonest dealing, he praises the manager for his shrewdness. The end.

What a strange story. Why would the rich man praise the manager for doing something dishonest? After telling the story, Jesus gives a little interpretation and says something equally puzzling. "Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest (we could also say unrighteous) wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." Make friends through dishonesty and unrighteousness? Make friends with wealth? I thought true friendship could not be bought. How can unrighteousness be okay, even if it might be in the service of an eventual good?

As we scratch our heads over this story, we have to remember that we are reading in the Gospel according to Luke. The writer of this Gospel includes several episodes and stories that highlight Jesus' concern for the poor as well as his warnings to the rich. People with wealth will have a hard time following Jesus. You may remember Jesus' famous saying, "It will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." That is the Jesus we hear so many times in Luke. So when Jesus says make friends by means of unrighteous wealth, he's not making a distinction between righteous and unrighteous wealth, because all wealth is unrighteous in Luke's Gospel. Wealth and money are just plain dirty. No matter how hard we try to make a so-called "honest" living, all wealth is tainted with some degree of dishonesty and unrighteousness. Somewhere along the line, someone or something

suffered injustice to bring that money to us. Think about it sometime....where did my money come from? Jesus' advice to make friends with unrighteous wealth, then, is not advice to do something dirty. He is perhaps saying that in spite of our dirty wealth, we should use that wealth to form welcoming relationships. That way, when the money runs out, and it will run out eventually (you can't take it with you), we can rely on a righteous attitude of giving rather than an unrighteous attitude of buying and selling. God's kingdom is not about buying and selling. It's about giving and forgiving. It's about welcoming each other in the name of Christ. The rich man in the story praises the manager for being shrewd and recognizing that wealth and the privileges it bestows only go so far. The manager is shrewd for using the little power he has to make friends who will welcome him when he has nothing left.

We, too, are unrighteous managers. We, too, have squandered what God has given us. Who will welcome us when we have nothing left? Will the working poor who cook our food and make our toys in faraway lands and clean our rooms and deal with our garbage welcome those of us who take advantage of their cheap prices and low wages? Will the millions of sick people who cannot get medicine because it costs too much welcome those of us who have sat by and watched it happen? Will mother earth, polluted and scarred by our carelessness and mismanagement, welcome us when we squander the last of our resources? Who will welcome us, unrighteous managers that we are? We have used and abused what God has given us. We have neglected to care for one another, and the parable should serve as a warning that our master will one day come to ask for an account. Do we have the prudence, like the manager in the story, to find friends who will welcome us? And what about that manager in the story? How realistic is it for the manager to think that these so-called "friends" are going to welcome him when he is out on the street? When he no longer has his master's wealth to play around with, why would they take him in? We already said that real friendship cannot be bought.

The manager, however, is not buying friends. He is forgiving debtors. There is a difference. Buying and selling create opportunities for ownership and debt. There are strings attached. Forgiveness, on the other hand, creates opportunities for reconciliation and giving. No strings attached. It may appear that the manager is just bribing the debtors by marking down their bills. But this kind of bribe opens the door for a relationship built on forgiveness rather than ownership. When the manager comes to the debtor's door empty handed, perhaps they will forgive him as they themselves were forgiven. That's why Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's prayer: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. We need to be reminded that we are all debtors, and we are all unrighteous managers. By forgiving one another we bear witness to an alternative economic system in which welcome is more valuable than wealth.

In the world's economy, the wealthy are the most welcome. The people with the greatest money receive the greatest access. In God's economic system, though, the people counted as wealthy are those people who can welcome and be welcomed by others. It is the people who have nothing and yet are welcomed by everyone who have access to the grace of God. In God's economy, wealth is not measured in terms of material goods. It

is measured in terms of the goodness of the heart, the love we have not the things we have, the willingness to give and to forgive.

This parable we heard today, puzzling as it is, is certainly teaching us about God's economy. As committed members of the body of Christ, we are God's economists, God's managers. Today, Muz, Linda, and Aisha will recommit themselves to Christ, and all of us will join them in renewing our Baptismal covenant. Part of what we are committing ourselves to is being God's economists. The managers and the economists of the world talk about creating wealth. As God's economists, we need to be talking about creating welcome, creating opportunities to receive one another in the name of Christ. The world's economists talk about investing in the markets. As God's economists, we need to be talking about investing in relationships and divesting from greed and fear. The world's economists talk about debt consolidation. As God's economists, we need to be talking about debt reconciliation and debt forgiveness. It's time to lighten each other's load. It's time to put our money where our heart is not our heart where our money is. But it is also time to remember that while we are God's managers we are unrighteous managers. We squander the resources God has given us and we all need forgiveness. God give us the grace to use what we have left to forgive and welcome others so that we might be welcomed and forgiven.