

First of all, I want to thank all of you who turned out yesterday for our first All-Church Leadership Retreat at Bethel Horizons Retreat Center. There were fifteen of us on a beautiful day in a beautiful place -- fifteen coming together to discuss and reflect on community, mission, leadership.

We left with the intention of continuing this conversation and we left with the intention of working together as Trinity churches: Trinity Episcopal Church of Mineral Point and Trinity Episcopal Church of Platteville. At the very close of the meeting, I was approached by two individuals with the suggestion that we look at Sunday November 13th as a possible Sunday to begin a quarterly common worship service together. This will be a topic for both vestries to consider. We also left with a joint committee to work together on this and other topics: Claire Holland, James Hibbard, Beth McGehee, Joan Riedle. It was a good day.

But when I came back into town I found myself once again staring at a text from the Gospel of Luke -- a text that I had been staring at all week: Luke 16:1-13. I have been ransacking commentaries on this text and commentator after Biblical commentator has owned up that this is a very difficult text. One commentator said it was one of the most difficult texts in the Bible.

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Over the past several Sundays, we have been treated to some really marvelous texts. They have been diverse -- some challenging like the challenge of following Jesus and the cost of that discipleship. Some are deeply affirming like the parable of the shepherd searching for that one lost sheep or the peasant woman sweeping her house and finding that one lost coin.

So this text comes as a kind of shock: a man who has been squandering his master's property and who has quickly changed the accounting of debts owed to his master is praised. He is not a shining example. He is not a paragon of virtue. He is in fact a street-smart guy who knows how to survive.

This text almost accosts us. It gives us a shock and wrenches us. Where did this come from, we might say? And why does the master, who has been really the victim of mismanagement and squandering actually commend the dishonest and irresponsible manager because he had acted shrewdly?

If there is one word that I encountered in reading various commentaries about this text, it was the word *rascal*. Webster defines the term as *a mean trickish fellow, a base dishonest person; a rogue; knave*. One wonders, how did this guy make it into the pages of sacred scripture?

In telling this story, to his disciples, Jesus says *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*.

Frankly that does seem to me to help much. But there it is, along with *Whoever is faithful in very little is faithful also in much* (but the man has not been faithful!). And then *No slave can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and wealth*. I should point out that some texts separate these verses from the story as if to suggest that some of these teachings are indeed separate.

This morning, I still find myself wrenched by this perplexing text and perhaps always will be. But there are also some interesting dimensions of this story and some interesting suggestions from commentators.

1. The first suggestion if one from commentators-- and that is to take the actions of this man and compare them with the final teaching at the end of our lesson: **You cannot serve God and wealth**. It was a rich man who had this dishonest manager. Did the riches of this man corrupt the manager as he squandered money that was not his? And was his quick action to recalculate all of the debts owed to his master just an attempt only to carve out a new life for himself. Or was it an attempt to change the bills by eliminating hidden interest and other charges. Barbara Rossing, New Testament professor at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago suggests that this might in fact be a possibility. The charging of interest was forbidden by Jewish law. She writes:

**Wealthy landlords in Jesus' day created "ways to charge interest under other guises," often hiding interest by rolling it into the principal. ...[Another scholar] explains, "The hidden interest rates appear to have been about 25 percent for money and 50 percent for goods."<sup>6</sup> Rossing suggests: "The manipulative steward was probably extracting his own cut of the profits, on top of the 50% layer for the landlord, and the additional payment for Rome.**

**When he reduced the payments, the steward may have been simply forgiving his own cut of the interest. Or he may have been doing what the law of God commands, namely forgiving all the hidden interest in the contracts." [Another scholar, as Richard Horsley states], "To ingratiate himself with the debtors, he had them change the amount they owed on their bills to exactly the amount they borrowed, eliminating the hidden and prohibited interest."<sup>7</sup> If the rich landlord was**

**not a Gentile, but a Jew (the text does not say), he would know the Torah teaching against interest. The rich man, "suddenly recognizing that he needed at least to appear to be observing convenantal laws, commended his steward."**

So in this interpretation the rascally rascal is eliminating his own cut of the debt to ingratiate himself with the debtors. The wealthy man cannot complain too much because everyone knows that what is being eliminated are add on charges.

2. One aspect of this text relates to our first lesson from Amos. This lay prophet speaks out against trampling upon the needy and ruining the poor of the land by false business practices. He is pointing out that dishonesty especially among the rich of the land is especially powerful in bringing misery and suffering to poorer and far less powerful members of his society.

The dishonest manager in Jesus' story is at a turning point.

Perhaps mired in questions about why Jesus is telling us this story, we overlook the dishonest manager's dilemma: *Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg....*

My grandfather made a fateful decision when he was a young man. Newly arrived from Sweden, he left Portland Oregon and joined the Nome Alaska gold rush. After his plans mostly disappeared from view, grandfather, a short stocky strong man, worked for another gold digger. He spent the day, all day, shoveling dirt and earth into another man's sluice box. Day after day he struggled with the demands of this work and with the need to save enough money to get out of Nome before winter closed in. He barely made it. He saved just enough to catch the last boat out of Nome.

*I am not strong enough to dig.* We do not understand the razor thin line between comfort and misery, just enough and far too little, a sustainable life and a slow inevitable descent into death itself. But Jesus' disciples would understand. If you were a military officer, a merchant, a priest or rabbi in Jesus' day, life was pretty good. If you were a peasant, you were a member of the class that held the vast majority of the population. You were also living right at the subsistence level. But if you lived below that -- an artisan, a member of the unclean class below that-- you were in trouble. And if you were at the very bottom of the social order, then you were a member of what one sociologist calls the expendable class. You would not last long. You would be worn down and disregarded. Perhaps we

understand more clearly the rascal's cleverness in the face of this kind of desperation. Amos would understand.

I began this sermon speaking of how this text is difficult and wrenching. At the end, in the last verse, this story seems to me to be yet another example of Jesus' warnings against wealth. You cannot serve God and wealth or God and mammon. I suspect that no wealthy person except the very rich consider themselves wealthy. Most Americans do not. But consider the people of Haiti.

On average the people of Haiti live on just \$1 a day. In urban areas it is higher but still only about \$2 a day. There is one doctor for 10,000 persons. In the US the ratio is approximately one doctor for every 365 persons.

Wealth and poverty. Consider the people of Tanzania living on \$2 a day. Consider the average annual income of the members of the Lakota people at Standing Rock Reservation. The average income of these Americans is approximately \$4,500 a year. Consider the homeless persons in our world focusing all of their energy on one more night in safety and warmth, one more meal.

When we look at this story and others from this angle, really the perspective of the prophet Amos and other prophets, many of Jesus stories show us the need for forgiveness, compassion and mercy. Perhaps even this rascal is there for a reason.

In the name of God--Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

~ The Rev. Brian E. Backstrand, Rector