

Year C, Proper 20

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Our scripture today shows us a man who takes wealth that is not his own and uses it to save himself from destitution by garnering the goodwill of those he benefits. And surprisingly the man he takes that wealth from praises him for his shrewdness. Of all the parables this one seems particularly inscrutable. Just how are we to take this example of a shifty manager and find something good in it? Find something we can take away and use as we seek to live holy lives? Making things more complicated there is also the tendency we have as Christian readers to always want to read or hear the parables as allegories...that the characters in them are meant to represent God, or Jesus, or someone or something other than what it is. Yet here it seems inappropriate to do so. You see, the manager, the steward of the rich man's wealth, has managed that wealth poorly and to save his own skin, he gives away more of his master's wealth. None of this seems God-like. Professor Amy Jill Levine reminds us that from a Jewish perspective, which of course would have been the perspective of Jesus' and his listeners, these parables would not be meant as allegories, but instead reference real people, or real objects such as the sheep and the coin we heard about last week.¹ And so, perhaps we might try not to read too much into this story and simply assume that Jesus is really just talking about a wealthy man and his poor money manager. Keep it simple. And still, the parable continues to leave us puzzled.

Parables can have more than one meaning, and more than one way to understand them. One way to help us make sense of this one is to keep in mind that the whole of our reading ends with Jesus talking about how one handles what they have been given even if it isn't theirs to begin with. And that at the end of the teaching Jesus states: You cannot serve God and wealth. And so, I wonder if the manager's ability to be shrewd here isn't the key to interpretation. Shrewd can mean having sharp powers of judgement—perhaps there is a kind of wisdom at work here. And wisdom can be used for good or evil. In this case, the manager will survive his master's displeasure by helping the master's debtors and at the same time making both he and the master look generous. It is a moment when the manager shows some kind of wisdom around the wealth he has been given to steward, where previously he simply wasted it--squandered it as

¹Stories of Jesus: session one <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIxpPZvqGdI>

the text tells us. So perhaps Jesus is calling us to exercise wisdom, holy wisdom, when it comes to wealth. So even if this reading doesn't completely satisfy your wanting to understand this parable, let's run with it.

Think back to the values around resources that we hear Luke expressing in this gospel. We hear Luke talking about how the hungry will be fed, the marginalized invited to the dinner party, those who are suffering will be comforted and their discomfort removed. There is a kind of redistribution of resources be they of food, community, or comfort and it is done through hospitality. Welcoming one another to the table, into relationship. This is a vision of a just future. And so it helpful to see the role wealth plays in the gospel. Sometimes it is seen as a barrier when some have so much and so many have too little. Other times, like in the parables of the dinner banquet earlier in our gospel, it is an opportunity to call together people who are otherwise marginalized to come and feast at the host's table. If you can throw a party, do it and invite everyone. Wealth, by itself just is, we give it meaning. And so, it can be the product and cause of great harm, or it can be a tool of godly living. It depends on how it is wielded by the one who has been given it. Scriptures tell us that we are not called to seek wealth before we seek God, or to seek profit before the well-being of other humans as the prophet Amos tells us. God demands justice and abhors exploitation. Wealth must be used to serve God rather than becoming a terrible god to be served. So, the question isn't is wealth good or evil, the question is can we show wisdom in how we use it to serve God's will.

In her book, *The Soul of Money*, Lynn Twist writes that money is like water. When it flows, she writes: "...it can purify, cleanse, create growth, and nourish. But when it is blocked or held too long, it can grow stagnant and toxic to those withholding or hoarding it."² She says that it is our perspective, often one of scarcity, where we feel that we have to hang on to what is ours and accumulate wealth and thus money becomes the object of our desire, distorts our values and harms others who do not have that same wealth. It is this fear of not having enough that harms us all.

As an example of this, in St. Louis, Michigan the geographic center of the state, not far from my undergraduate school, there is a superfund site. A superfund site is a designated area of contamination, identified by the federal government as needing federal assistance to clean it up it

² Twist, Lynn. *Soul of Money: Reclaiming the wealth of our inner resources*. (New York, W.W. Norton and Company Inc. 2003) 102-103

is so badly contaminated. In this case the Velsicol Chemical company, which exists today though as part of a private equity firm³, had used the site from the 1930's through the 70's producing flame retardants, and pesticides, the most well-known being DDT. These were very useful chemicals, but overtime their usefulness was negated by the damage to the environment and to people. Eventually, the costs outweighed the benefits. And so, the chemistry has had to evolve to avoid the mistakes made in the past. But other remedies have been limited. You see, the folks in St. Louis are still living with the consequences of dumping dangerous chemicals into a river. So, while that plant is now closed, and the company long gone, the community that remains there is left to clean up the DDT contaminated soil, live with the health effects of living in a deeply contaminated environment, and all of us through the government funding are paying for the remediation of the river and surrounded soil. This work has been going on for decades and is still not finished. This is an example of what happens when money doesn't flow like water. Profits are privatized but the harm and the consequences are socialized. Some benefit, but many are harmed.

But there are other ways to be in the world. On Thursday Chuck and I attended a luncheon for the Canterbury Counseling Center. This is a community resource of counselors and therapists available to people regardless of their ability to pay. This center supports adults and children in working through trauma, supporting them as they deal with poverty, provide resources for education. This center accepts insurance and Medicaid, but it is also supported by the community, many churches and local agencies, individuals and families putting their time and treasure into caring for some of the area's most vulnerable people to heal them and care for them when there otherwise wouldn't be any help. And in this work, a community of people has been formed, one shaped by the desire to care for others, shaped by those who need care and by a desire to bring healing to all.

Twist writes also about this other way. When we approach our wealth with an understanding of sufficiency, that we have enough, that there is enough, we can then "recognize and celebrate money's power for good---our power to do good with it."⁴ And when wealth becomes that tool, then we are set free from the anxiety of having to have more, set free from the false sense of self that wealth provides us, set free from having that wealth be a barrier to being

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Velsicol_Chemical_Corporation

⁴ Soul of Money. P 103.

connected, truly connected to one another. Through our resources, through whatever wealth we have been given, we can use that to create change in the world, help bring to reality a world that we otherwise might only imagine. And there, in that world, we will find real wealth, which is community, abundance, connection, wholeness, peace. These are the things God desires for us. This is the kingdom.

Every Sunday we place our money in the offering plate, and it is gathered to the altar and lifted up, passing from us to God. It is part of our offering and is seen as a representation of our work in the world.⁵ Work which we do through our wealth, our gifts, whatever they are, whoever we are, however much wealth we have or don't have, which like the bread and the wine are first gifts of God to us, from whom we receive everything. Amen.

⁵ Price, Charles P., Weil, Louis. *Liturgy for Living*. (Morehouse, 2000).