

Proper 20 C 2019

Luke 16:1-13

Jesus told a lot of stories.
Some of them we love
From the moment we first encounter them.
Probably his first followers did as well.
Just for a moment,
Imagine with me,
Sitting on a hillside,
In the shade of an olive tree,
Listening to his voice.
Hearing his stories.
Stories like this one:

There was a man who had two sons,
And after his younger son had squandered his inheritance,
He said to himself,
I will arise, and go to my father,
And I will say to him,
I have sinned,
And am not worthy to be called your son.
But his father embraces him,
Covers his shame with the finest of garments,
And the feast begins.
The lost is found.

Tell another story,
Say the friends and followers of Jesus.
Another story just like that.
When I hear your stories,
I have hope.
I see a way forward.
I see a world beyond what I have always known.

So Jesus tells another story,
The story of the dishonest manager we heard just now.
Another story about the world,
And our way through it.
But in this story,
It's hard to find hope.
Hard to find the beyond.

It's a story,
Instead,

About us,
And the way things are in the world.
A story about squandering,
Which,
Truth be told,
Is what we do best.
Whether we are spenders or savers,
Sharers or hoarders,
We all,
Like it or not,
Squander the gifts we have been given.

First we grab,
And then we squander.

Why do we spend so much time
Trying to grab, or win,
By working, or scheming,
By cheating or by force,
The goods that are already ours for free?

Why do we spend so much time,
And so much energy,
Trying to survive and get ahead
In a world that makes us anxious,
Angry, and afraid,
When the door is open
To a world of freedom,
Meaning, and peace?

Why do we
Reach with one hand
And throw away with the other?

I wonder
Whether Jesus tells us this hard story
As an invitation to wonder.

He knows
We are bound to squander
At least some of what we have been given.
Part of the pain of being human
Is that we can acknowledge
The abundance of what we have received,
Each of us,
Through the simple gift of life,

And yet we cannot nurture and enjoy that gift
As carefully and joyfully
As we would hope to.

All of us together
Squander the measureless abundance
Of the planet;
All of us together fritter away
the heritage we have received
in our democracy.
All of us together idle away our hours
Looking down at our phones
When we could look up at the sky,
Or into each others' faces.

Whether we think of ourselves as careful and cautious
Or rash and impulsive,
All of us squander some of the riches
We have been given,
Physical health or material wealth
Or intelligence or kindness of heart,
Or life itself.

All of us have riches beyond our imagining,
Simply because we have within us the breath of life,
And all of us squander some of those riches,
No matter what.
That's part of being human.

The prodigal son squanders
the inheritance he has demanded,
And the shrewd manager squanders
The property entrusted to him.

Jesus knows this,
And he tells us stories
To invite us into the truth.
The truth of God,
That all is always forgiven
And everyone is always welcome,
And
The painful truth about ourselves.

It just so happens
That the parable he tells us today,
The story of the shrewd manager,

Is possibly the most difficult one we know.

There are two ways to go forward here.

One would be to take the parable apart
And look at all the pieces,
And ask,
Over and over again,
What is Jesus telling us here?
Surely the master isn't meant to be God? [*No*]
How does this make sense?

Another choice
Would be to listen to this parable
And hear it as a counterpoint,
A contrast,
To the story of grace.
In the parable of the shrewd manager
Jesus shows us one way of living in the world.
It's a real way,
A way chosen by many people.
It has definite advantages.

And it is a way
In stark contrast
To the way chosen
By the father of two sons.
In that story,
Where the father rejoices
As he welcomes home the prodigal,
Jesus expresses the heart of the gospel.

Now, I know that looking at the world
In terms of either/or
Has become an old-fashioned paradigm,
And I like many of you
Have tried to look at any number of situations
In terms of both/and.
Often that's a way to move forward.
That might be true here too,
But if so,
I don't see it yet.
What I do see
Is that if you set today's parable up against
The story of the man with two sons,
If you let this be an either/or situation,

A compelling choice becomes more clear.

Both stories begin with a fact of life.
We are schemers and squanderers,
Endlessly striving
For what we already have in abundance.
This is not a terrible thing;
It leads to excellence as well as greed,
Achievement as well as crime.
It is the reality in which we live.
And it leads us,
Sometime or other,
To a moment of truth.

In our striving for excellence,
Our working for achievement,
We fall short,
We hurt others,
We go astray.
It will happen.

When the moment of truth comes,
There are two ways to respond.
One is to turn around,
Seek forgiveness, and join the party.
Another is to rig the deck,
Change the rules of the game,
And win.
Both are real possibilities.
One is the gospel.
The other is business as usual.
It's a choice.

Jesus shows us the choice
In his stories.
The one we heard just now,
And the one we would rather remember.

Remember,
In some ways,
Each parable is happening inside us.
We play all the roles.
We are the squanderer who wakes up to the truth,
And we are the one who must respond
To the squanderer who wakes up and turns around,
And the squanderer

Who finds a way to get ahead.

Again, two ways open up.
The father comes running from the house,
Embraces his son,
And calls for music and dancing.
The master commends the manager.
He says something like this,
Nice work. I would have done the same myself
If I had thought of it.

One is God's world.
One is a world where striving,
Scheming, and squandering,
And money as its symbol,
is the boss.
You cannot, says Jesus,
Serve God and wealth.

You can live in the same world
In one of these two ways.
Which one is yours?
You cannot go both ways at once.

Jesus, you remember,
Talks a lot about money.
In fact,
He talks about money
More than anything else.
Because he knows
It is a symbol
And a vehicle
For our life's energy.
What we do with it matters.
It conveys our values and our power.

So when Jesus,
Having told a story of forgiveness,
And then a very different story,
of squandering and scheming,
when he then finishes
With a moral pronouncement,
You cannot serve God and wealth,
He is talking about an ultimate choice.

Where does your heart lie?

Either God rules your world,
And you live in a climate of repentance and welcome and joy,
Or money rules your world,
And the more shrewd you are,
The greater the rewards.

So, where does your heart lie?
You can serve God,
And let the money serve you.

I can serve the money,
But if I do,
I won't be serving God.
The money will be at the center,
And God on the side.
It's a choice.

We can try to figure it out
By looking at this stark choice,
But the centuries will tell us,
This doesn't work very well.
So instead, we can go back to the stories,
Where Jesus is waiting,
And ask this,
Which story do I want to live in?

Do I want to live in a story of endless indebtedness,
Or a world of endless gift,
Unearned,
Unwarranted,
Unexpected and astounding?
A miracle, in fact.

Where is my welcome waiting?
At the feast for the one
Who repents and returns,
Or the payback time
For the one who found a way to get by?

We live in a world of payback time.
And we are called,
I believe,
To witness to that world.
To say,
There is another story.

There is another way.

There is a way of turning around,
Turning back,
Seeking reconciliation,
Making amends,
Spreading an open table.

A way where all is offered and nothing is owed.
A way where all is forgiven
And nothing is held back.

What that looks like,
In your life,
Or mine,
Or ours,
The life of our nation,
The life of our planet,
We can glimpse,
We can pursue.

We are called to seek it,
To grow in it,
To offer it.

All we have to do,
Is first accept it.