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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*September 18, 2022*

*Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; I Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13*

Today we begin a 4-week preaching series about Stewardship. The gospel text that we heard today and the texts we will hear the next 3 Sundays all have something to do with wealth, or money, or growing our thanks and our gifts back to God.

And yet, today we start out with yet another totally strange parable from Jesus that might not make any sense at all. In this peculiar story from Luke 16, Jesus seems to be praising this dishonest manager who squanders his master's property and then, when his manager tells him he's going to fire him, he goes to his master's debtors and decreases their debt, so that, in his words, "when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes."

Now you would think that Jesus would say, "and the lesson of the parable is, don't do that, don't be dishonest with wealth, especially wealth that isn't yours" but instead Jesus tells the disciples that the master commended the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly, and then 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." *Is Jesus off his rocker or what?*

This week when Erin Carampot and I were at Columbia Theological Seminary for the ReKindle gathering, we experienced some incredible theological and biblical teaching with professors from the seminary. In one session, we looked closely at the parable of the talents – remember that story in Matthew 25? In that parable, a master goes away on a journey and entrusts to one slave 5 talents, to another 2, and to another 1 (remember that 1 talent equaled about 15 years' wages). When he came back from his journey, the master commended the slaves with the 5 and 2 talents who had doubled their master's money. But the one who had received one talent told him,

"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' (and the rest of the story goes...) But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter?...As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Well after we read the parable, we made 2 columns that said: Evidence that the person giving the talents is God, and evidence that the person giving the talents is not God.

Honestly, it was impossible to come up with any reasons that the master in this parable was God, even though that's how we've often read this parable – like, don't be afraid and bury the talents God gives you. But think about this, unlike the master in the parable, God doesn't go away from us. God doesn't have a scarcity mindset that says "you better do what I say or there won't be enough for all of us." God is not harsh, reaping where God does not sow and gathering where God does not scatter. God does throw us into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Realizing that the master in the parable of the talents is *not* God was a watershed for me. Jesus tells the parable of the talents not because God is the master and we should all double our "talents." Jesus tells this parable to say – this is how the world is – an economic system that is centered on the rich getting richer and where making more money is the most important thing to do.

But the one who buried his one talent in this parable was not going to play that game. This is not how the world should be, he insisted, I am not going to let my focus be only about making more money. And that's exactly where Jesus would agree.

It's the same with this parable that we heard today. The master in this parable today is not God. When the master commends the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly and 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," this isn't a commentary on what God is like, it's a commentary on what the world is like and what's wrong with it.

Jesus tells these kinds of parables to contrast how the world is with what God's vision is – what the kingdom of God on earth should be.

In the last verse of today's parable, Jesus says, "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." You cannot, Jesus is saying, act like the world acts and be solely devoted to acquiring wealth, because if your focus is just about making more money, it will make it impossible to also serve God.

What I think this parable does is confront us with a deeply important truth, that how we relate to money is a barometer of how we relate to God. This parable makes us ask ourselves the question, do we love wealth more than we love God? I imagine your first thought would be "well, of course not," but think for a minute about these things:

Where you put your most trust?

Where do you find your comfort?

Do you spend more time being anxious about not having enough than you do living in God's promise that you will be taken care of?

Are you drowning out God's call in your life because you are too busy earning, buying, protecting, storing, and maintaining your stuff?

Do you spend more time attending to your material wealth than to your spiritual health?

This week, if you're a member of CLC, you'll be receiving your stewardship pledge card for 2023. Before you fill it out to return to church on or by October 9, I hope you'll first take your "money temperature." Ask yourself, am I more concerned about gathering money than I am about stewarding money? Am I trying to find my security in money, or am I trying to find my security in God? Depending on your answer, I'm guessing you'll find it a lot easier and joyful to fill out your pledge card if you are not trying to serve both wealth and God. And when you joyfully release back to God what is God's to begin with, you help bring the kingdom of God to earth. You help make God's vision a reality.

I want to end by telling you why Erin and I were learning about the parable of the talents when we were at Columbia Theological Seminary this week. Yes, we learned that the master in the parable isn't God, but we also studied the parable with this question in mind: unlike the master who had a scarcity mindset, do we trust that God is enough for our congregation? Do we trust that God is enough for us?

When we have that deep and abiding trust, when we know that God guides, leads, protects, and upbuilds our congregation, we can then partner with God to rekindle our ministry and thrive. May our collective prayer be that we find our security and purpose in God, for God is enough. Amen.