

Luke 16:1-13  
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“Invitation to Switch Sides”

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In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, my church, Belmont United Methodist Church in Nashville, TN., announced a new ministry for youth, a “Workcamp” trip. The youth would travel to a rural part of Tennessee, live in modest conditions; and work on people’s homes. We would be doing general repairs necessary to make living conditions better and safer for a family who could not do the work themselves or afford to pay someone. On the Workcamp Trip the youth would also be assigned to teams which would take turns cleaning up, cooking meals, preparing lunches, and planning morning devotions and evening worship. The Youth minister promised it would be a lot of much fun and announced it would cost “\$200.”

After the meeting my Dad asked if I wanted to go to on the Workcamp trip? I quickly replied, “No.” In my mind, I already had a good summer job making money and I simply could not comprehend why anyone leave a paying job, and the comforts of home to spend money and go work somewhere else. Looking back, I believe I missed a God opportunity the day I said “No!”

Today we encounter a twisted parable. Near the end of the parable Jesus says, “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.” Let’s see if we can unpack Jesus’ parable and find good news for all of us.

Understanding the Parable of the Dishonest Manager begins by knowing it is part of Jesus’ larger group of parables beginning in Luke 15. There Jesus tells the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. These parables are provided as answers to the Pharisees who have criticized Jesus for hanging around with people many Pharisees considered disposable, like outcasts and sinners.

Today, Jesus tells the first of two more parables, both in Chapter 16 and both about a Rich man. These are a continuation of the same conversation begun in Chapter 15. They reveal how the Pharisees did not value people properly because they improperly valued money too much.

Hopefully with a little basic information about 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian economics, this parable’s meaning will become clearer.

Christian author and colleague Brian McLaren offers this description, “It starts with the Romans, you have to remember the backdrop to everything in the gospels is the occupation of Israel/Palestine by the Romans. The Romans would come in as occupiers and do two things: exploit natural resources and exploit the labor of the people. They did this in large part through taxation.

Next, it helps to know the rich people lived in the south, in the State of Judea, where the capital city and spiritual capital, Jerusalem was. The poor, small farmers lived in north, in Galilee.

The Romans needed a lot of wine, wheat and olive oil from the farmlands of Galilee. And you would think this would be an opportunity for the small farmers to get wealthier, but it didn't work that way. What happened is the Romans would tax the small farmers, who could not afford to pay the taxes. Then, the rich down in Judea would come along and say "we have a deal for you small farmers, we will pay your taxes in exchange for the deed to your property. You can live on as tenant farmers for the low cost of each year giving us a percentage of your wheat, wine and olive oil."

The rich guys from the south would sell the wheat for Roman bread, sell the wine for Roman banquets, and the olive oil for... I don't know, maybe Caesar salad, there was a big market for these in Rome. Along the way the rich got richer and the poor, poorer.

One more detail... When the rich in south went to get their percentage from the farmers up north, they did not want to go themselves - perhaps it was not safe for them to go due to being hated by the people they were exploiting. So instead, they would pay mid-level managers to go and say, "pay up" we need our barrels of olive oil, or bushels of wheat.

That's the backdrop for this parable. There was a rich man who had a manager... and this rich man is mad at manager because he is not getting a big enough return on investment. So, he tells the manager, "I am going to fire you, give me an accounting of all your work."

I wonder how many of us today feel somewhat like this manager, kind of a middle-class folks trying to get by, this manager is caught in between the very rich and the poor.

The manager thinks to himself, "I worked with this guy all these years. Now he is ready to throw me out and I have no security. As this manager realizes how expendable he was to the rich man, he decides to switch sides. He begins arranging things so now, he will have friends among the poor.

So, he goes to the farmers up north. How much olive oil do you owe? 100 barrels? Let's make it 80. How much wine do you owe? A couple metric tons? We'll make it 1.2. He gets some return for the Rich man, but he does so in a way that gives a break to the poor.

Let me step aside a moment and say; this is not a story about a group of people who are evil and terrible. Also, it is not a story about money being evil and terrible. It is about a manager who saw through the injustices of an ancient economic system and decided to switch sides and work for the poor.

In terms of money I think Jesus is saying, "We all do better when we use our money in service of building relationships, rather than to use relationships in the service of gaining money." And that's why Jesus concludes, "you cannot serve two masters."

We live in a time when our resources; oceans, mountains, air, rivers, soil, and sometimes even particular groups of people are treated without much consideration for their inherent value. Instead these resources are considered for how they can be converted or used to make a profit, often for those already at the top of the economic pyramid.

Ok let's pause and take a deep breath. This is uncomfortable stuff Jesus is laying on us. But let me say if you are uncomfortable with Jesus message, so am I. If you feel resistance, I do too. We might ever wonder what other economic system would work better. I share those same questions and feelings. Yet, I do believe this is what Jesus is saying and as hard as it is, I think this time Our Savior, who loves and values every one of us, is intending to unease his followers a little.

Maybe it will help to put this another way, Jesus is inviting us to consider an economic system similar to the one we use here in a local congregation. At Emanuel we don't break the budget into equal apportionments and require every member to pay an equal share. Together we seek to build a budget which sets forth an inspiring vision for mission and ministry, peace and reconciliation, a budget which invites us to live in relationship with diverse people and all creation, and through congregational input and approval we hope this vision, along with our thankfulness to God, inspires us to give generously. We expect some will give more than others as they are so moved and within their capability. We expect gifts will come in other forms like time and talent as well. The idea is each year we want to build a vision that draws diverse people into relationship with God, with creation, and with each other.

Jesus teaches us today the kingdom of God on earth invites us into an economic system which does not create disposables. When we put God at the top; love God first, it seems everything else has new value. We come to realize that this means none of God's good gifts are expendable, including you and me.

God's economy can free us. A freedom that I missed in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, when self-centered me said "No" to my Youth Group Workcamp trip... I missed an opportunity to grow in Jesus' call to put God, and each other first. Thankfully God sends many more opportunities to grow. And I expect there are more opportunities on the way for all of us.

Amen