

Luke 16.1-9
9th Sunday after Trinity
18 August 2019
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Other Sundays have their names. There's the Sunday of the Pharisee and the Publican—named because of the two characters in the temple. The one with his eyes lifted up toward God in pride, the other with his eyes cast down in shame at his own sin. All of you know that parable well. Then there's Good Shepherd Sunday. That Sunday actually already had a name—*Misericordias domini*, “the mercies of the Lord”—but because of the powerful image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, well, most of us today know it as Good Shepherd Sunday.

Today we have no less striking an image and story and parable from the Scriptures. It's the story, in modern parlance, of the CFO who pulled the wool over his CEO's eyes. Like every CFO, he was in charge of the books. And through some scheme or another—it's not important what it was—he'd managed to line his pockets with the company's profits.

But then the jig was up. The CEO caught wind of it. Maybe through an outside audit. We don't know. It doesn't matter.

So the CFO, why, he had to think fast. And act even faster. Federal prison is no fun—not even white collar federal prison. He wasn't gonna flip burgers at McDonald's, either. And so he went to all the vendors and clients of his company. People with long track records of doing solid business with the company and CEO. His business card got him in the door. He opened his briefcase. Took out the files with the pertinent bills for each of the vendors and clients. And to the vendors he said: “We already paid you \$100,000 for twenty diesel generators. But forget it. Keep the \$100,000, but you'll only need to deliver 10.” And to the clients he said, “At your request we sent you 10,000 units of product. You still owe us \$50,000. But never mind. Today's your lucky day. We're only asking for \$25,000.”

And when the CEO found out he did what virtually no CEO would ever do: He stood by the deals brokered by his corrupt CFO.

That's the parable in a modern telling. And if we had to name the Sunday we might...we might...be inclined to call it “Three Cheers for Embezzlement Sunday” or something like that.

In fact, it seems like Jesus Himself would approve of that name. After all, at the end of the story the CEO doesn't call in the Feds. He praises the CFO. And then Jesus Himself commends the actions of the corrupt CFO by saying that you, the faithful, the children of the light need to be more like the corrupt CFO.

“Go ye, therefore, and hack the accounts of all companies. Pilfer as much as you can. And line your pockets in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And then play Robin Hood when you get caught!” Jesus seems to be saying.

Well, good catechesis ought to warn us off that trail as soon we've spotted it.

You shall not steal. What does this mean? We should fear and love so that we do not take our neighbor's money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but—and here's the HIPPI mnemonic—help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.

It's a dead end.

So then what is going on? Some commentators in the 18th and 19th centuries who wanted to reduce Christianity to a bunch of moral precepts went so far as to say Luke must have gotten this parable wrong. Or if not the parable, then he attached some random saying of Jesus to it at the end on the same theme and just...ended up with a mess.

But that's giving up too easy.

For the Scriptures were written for our learning. They're divinely inspired, every word of them. They're profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. And they can't be broken. Which is to say, you can't make one teaching of Scripture fall by bringing another against it.

So something else is going on here.

Now, I'm going to introduce you to a fancy theological term. An important one. It's this: *tertium comparationis*. Sometimes theologians just call it the *tertium*.

Basically what the *tertium comparationis* is is this: it's the single point of comparison that any parable has. Get the *tertium comparationis* right, and you can crack the parable. But if you miss it or mess it up or try to shoehorn too much into the *tertium comparationis* you end up with an interpretation like we had before that had Jesus telling His children of the light to go out and line their pockets by hacking their employers' accounts.

Now, oftentimes the *tertium* doesn't emerge right from the parable. Jesus here, for example, never says something like He does when He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls" or "The kingdom of heaven is like a net."

But there are clues. Big clues. Easy clues.

Just before this parable Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son. You remember that one. The child took his half of the inheritance, went off, squandered it in the most sinful ways, came to his senses and repented, and returned home desiring to just work in old dad's fields...only to find dad waiting at the end of the driveway with open arms.

There the *tertium* is clearly this: the mercy of the father toward his prodigal son is just like the Lord's mercy toward us sinners in Christ.

And that's exactly what's going on here. With a slight shade of difference. We'll come to that a little later.

Now look, in this parable there's a subtext. An important subtext. One which, if you miss it, you'll miss the whole point of the parable, too. We can catch glimpses of it in Jesus' words. It has to do with the social practices of ancient Palestine. But it's hard for us to see because economic and social life in America today is very different from back then.

But it wasn't long ago—in fact just last century still—that corporations, with all their wealth and employment opportunities thought of themselves as having a huge obligation and loyalty to the communities where they had their shops. Tell that to a former Payless employee and they'll look at you with incredulity. But even my own grandfather started work 1928 at age 16 in the same Allis Chalmers shop he retired from at age 70 in 1982. Allis Chalmers built the houses in an entire community for its employees. It's called West Allis. And then Allis Chalmers went on and supplied adequate salaries so its employees could buy the houses there. The company gave them a generous pension and generous retirement insurance—my grandfather complained about having to pay \$1.80 for his health insurance in his 90s—in the 2-aughts, 80 years after he picked up his first broom at Allis Chalmers. An entire community was built up around that shop—small businesses, families, houses and homes, schools and churches. And the company, till it was bought out, thought of itself as obligated by its own honor to continue to support the community and everyone in it.

That's a modern example of how it was in ancient Palestine.

The rich man in the parable—he's an honorable man. Obligated to his community. When he acts, he's merciful. That's why he has so many debtors. He doesn't chase them out of house and home, claim what's rightfully his, and take back fields and vineyards and olive groves. He lets it slide. Because he's moved by loyalty toward his people and compassion and mercy. Sounds like the prodigal son's father, doesn't it?

And the steward—the CFO over the whole operation—he's not so very different from the prodigal son himself, either. His sins aren't little sins. They're big sins. He squanders what belongs to his boss. Just like the prodigal son, who took his father's hard-earned wealth and spent it in the Red Light District in Amsterdam.

You see, both were tempted. But neither beyond their ability. That's what God promises. The prodigal was under no compulsion to spend his money on hookers. But he did. The steward was under no compulsion to waste and pilfer. It should have been as easy as remembering the 7th commandment and taking the other tine at the fork in the road. But he didn't.

And in that you are not so different. God has already given you the measure of your life. It's His 10 Commandments. The Lord says, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do them." (Deut. 29.29) Love God above all things. Trust in Him above all things. Fear Him above all things. And love...not yourself, but your neighbor as yourself. Obey authority. Help your neighbor in every physical need. Love and cherish your spouse. Help your neighbor protect his possessions and income. Use your tongue to build up your neighbor. Set your mind on God's kingdom, and not the things of this earth. The rest will be added unto you. That's what you've been created to do. Each in your own vocation. Even when it means swallowing your pride. Even when its cost seems greater than you think you can bear.

That's the measure of your life. Temptation is the impulse to do the opposite. Doing the opposite is sin. And yet, how often—just like for the dishonest manager—the *good* work gets duct taped and packed in the trunk while the wicked work does the driving. God would not have you live like that. It's bad for your neighbor. Worse, it's bad for you. In fact, it breaks you.

Just like it broke the dishonest steward. His wicked works got him to a point he couldn't bail himself out of. What did he owe his boss? 5 years' salary? 20 years' salary? 200 years' salary? It doesn't matter. The debt was enormous. Crushing. There was nothing he could do to redeem himself. The only careers left to him were entirely dishonorable—ditch-digging and begging—but even they couldn't help him keep his own body and soul together, much less his family's. And there was no way to pay back the debt. He was totally ruined.

As are you apart from Christ. Apart from Christ, your body and soul will be separated in death only to be reunited in the eternal debtor's prison, the fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Start now if you want—start leading the perfect life the Lord demands of you—but you'll quickly come to the realization that the steward did. Just like digging ditches or begging were useless for him, you can't possibly pay back what you owe. For the perfect life you'd live from this point on is what God requires of you anyway. And no superperfection of yours has any chance of undoing what you've already done. You see!?! You're ruined, too.

So what's left for you to do? You're hemmed in every side. There's no way out. And your future—well, it's already well mapped out. It goes like this. Death. A hole in the ground. And hell.

That's where the dishonest steward found himself, too.

But behold what he did! There was a way out!

It just wasn't him. It was the good, generous, merciful, compassionate rich man! The steward's temptation to sin was killing him. And there was only one way to life: the rich man. The very man he'd sinned against.

So that's what he did. He threw himself on the rich man's compassion.

Now, in the parable all that goes down in a pretty circuitous route. To save his life, he squanders even more of the rich man's money. Because he knows what kind of man he is—he stands by his word and promise. If he's promised to slash debts, even through the mouth of his corrupt steward, well, it's as good as done. And once the corrupt steward has been able to slash debts owed by others to his boss, he knows he's got a place to work and stay and earn money to keep body and soul together.

Fellow-redeemed: if your conscience was scratched by the litany of good works you should be doing, but aren't, you're as helpless as the steward.

But don't start digging ditches. Don't start begging. Instead, throw yourself at the mercy of your heavenly Father, against whom you've sinned. No temptation has come to you beyond your ability. But you've succumbed to them. But the Lord *has* provided you a way out. And in *spectacular* form.

The perfect life you should've been living all along but haven't? Lived by Christ. For you. The debt you owe and could never pay back in a million years? Paid by Christ in His holy death on the cross. The curse of a resurrection to eternal death and hell? Broken by Christ, who rose in triumph over your death and your hell. And has gone to prepare a place *for you!*

You see, that's the mercy, compassion, and honor of your heavenly Father. He would not have the death of the sinner. So He does something about it since you can't—and gives His only-begotten Son that

whosoever believes in Him should perish but have everlasting life. That's all. No ditch-digging. No begging. No working it off. It's all pure gift. To you.

But you—oh, you—you're so timid in your faith! Your conscience is so sensitive you can't possibly grab and lay claim to such a gift.

That's why Jesus praises not the rich man, but the steward. You see, the steward—he acted shrewdly. The gift was staring him in the face. He took at face value the character of his rich boss. And he seized and grabbed it.

That's what faith does. It doesn't cower in a corner. It responds to God's words and will and works by taking them and running with them. And God's words to you? "I lay down My life for the sheep." His will toward you? "God desires all men to be saved—even you—and to come to the knowledge of the truth." His works for you? "God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." All gift. All for you.

And that's why Jesus praises the corrupt manager. He's got more faith in a frail human being than you do in God Himself.

But notice that Jesus doesn't call you, a child of the light, faithless. He just says you have little faith.

All's not lost. It wasn't the faith of the corrupt manager that kept him out of debtor's prison. It was the good graces of his boss.

Just so for you: it's not the fervency of your faith that saves. In fact, it's not your faith at all. All faith does is receive what God gives. What saves you is the good graces of Christ, your Lord. Your debt has been paid in His holy, innocent blood. Once for all. And through your Baptism He's promised you, by name, in words that cannot be broken that He will receive you into His heavenly home.

Amen.

pax domini, etc.

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