

**Sermon for September 18, 2016 (Proper 20, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: 1 Timothy 2:1-10; Psalm 113; Luke 16:1-13

Title: Make Friends For Yourselves

Once, a long time ago, a disciple of a great spiritual teacher came to his master with a complaint: “You tell us many stories, but you never reveal their true meaning to us.”

The teacher replied, “And how would you like it if someone offered you fruit to eat, but he chewed it up before giving it to you?”

This, my friends, is what the parables of Jesus are like.

They are like good, healthy, wholesome food. But, in order to receive their nutrition, you have to chew them with your own teeth in your own mouth.

And some parables, like the one which we are called to chew upon today, are a bit like a rough piece of steak. You have to chew and chew and chew!
You really have to work on it to get something out of it!

Today is one of those points in the Revised Common Lectionary that seems designed to keep us preachers honest.

That’s because this parable of the dishonest manager is one that most of us would gladly choose to skip over, if we could!

If you are astute, you will notice that the first lessons which we read change from time to time. The Bishop allows us to stray from the lectionary to pursue certain themes or to keep consistency within certain books of the Bible.

But not so with the Gospel readings. The lectionary gives us a course to read through most of all 4 Gospels within the three year cycle, and we are called to be faithful to that course.

And so we are stuck with this difficult and chewy text.

What are we to think of this parable? What did it mean to those who first heard it? And what spiritual nutrition can we derive from it for our lives today?

First of all, we need to remember that this is the Gospel of Luke. This is the Gentile's Gospel. And in Luke's Gospel, the issue of money and wealth and what to do with it has a very prominent place.

In fact, this sixteenth chapter of Luke contains two parables which begin in the exact same way: "There was a rich man..." The second parable we will hear next week. It is the famous parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

In today's story, a sloppy or dishonest manager is caught "squandering" his boss's property.

The rich owner lets him know that he is dismissed, but the manager still has time to make one more move, one final act to secure some kind of future for himself after he leaves his office.

We must assume that the tenants of the land, the debtors, did not know that the manager was fired, so they continue to deal with him as he renegotiates their debt.

We don't really know what he is doing here. There is no explanation in the text. One interpretation is that the manager is canceling his own commission that has been tacked on to the debts.

Another option is that he is canceling the interest that has been charged by the landowner on these debts.

Or perhaps he is frantically making deals with no clear rational objective, simply doing what he can to win favor with the tenants.

No matter what his strategy may be, he is commended for it.

Our text says that he was commended for acting "shrewdly", but the word also means prudently, wisely. It is NOT necessarily a negative description.

So again we ask, what are we to think of this parable?

Remember that these parables of Jesus come from an historical context which matters. What did this parable say to those who heard it first?

Generally, in all parables like this, God is the landowner, and it is possible that this story works in the same way.

Consider this explanation: God is the master, the Lord, who has given the land into the care of a manager, a steward known as the nation of Israel.

There is no doubt that the story concerns large commercial-type farming. The first debtor addressed owes 100 jugs of oil. Each of their jugs held about 9 gallons, so we are talking about a tax equal to 900 gallons of olive oil! Even in today's context, that's a lot of oil!

This is not subsistence farming. This is large-scale production, suggesting a big-picture, social context of the entire nation producing fruit on the promised land.

But with the coming of the Messiah, things are about to change.

The teachings of Jesus in ALL the Gospels explain quite clearly that the Lord is not pleased with the management of Israel, especially with the leaders of the people.

Their sacred inheritance is about to be given away. Israel is being fired as the primary bearers of the truth and grace of God.

The nation is being demoted from the first-team and sent back to the bench!

And so what is Israel to do? The wise approach is to make friends with the other nations, with the Goyim, the Gentiles, so that when Israel is dispossessed of the land, they will find hospitality with their neighbors.

The Lord gives this advice: "Make friends for yourselves (notice the plural!) by means of dishonest wealth so that, when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes" (Luke 16:9).

The word translated here as "dishonest wealth" is the ancient Aramaic word "mammon" which simply means wealth or riches or money.

It's the same word as at the very end: "You cannot serve God and mammon – or money or wealth."

Make friends for yourselves by means of the material resources at your disposal, so that, when your circumstances change, your friends will welcome you and take care of you.

So, in historical context, you can see how this makes sense.

But what does this parable teach US for our lives today, in this day and time?

For one thing, it reminds us once again that we are Gentiles, and we have been welcomed into the family of Abraham. It's not our natural inheritance. We have been adopted by the grace of Christ.

This text also reminds us that we have to make a real choice. We cannot serve God and wealth!

Now, to be honest, I doubt very much whether any of us here would ever directly choose to serve money.

For US, the choice has more to do with HOW we use our money, our resources - either for self-centered ends – for our own comfort, for social standing, for the sake of luxury – OR we use use them for the sake of others.

By the way, have any of you noticed how every single new condo complex in Portland is advertised as "luxury condos"? I just don't get it. Why can't people live in regular condos? Why do they all have to be LUXURY condos?

If you're thinking only by worldly standards, then I guess that's the normal. But if you are choosing to think by God's standards, this will not sit well with you.

Just as the letter to Timothy urges Christ-honoring women to eschew "gold, pearls or expensive clothes", in the same way, Christ-honoring people in the business world are not focused on outward appearances or maximizing profits, but rather on "doing good" as much as possible with the resources at their disposal (1 Timothy 2:9-10).

Will we focus our time and efforts and energy on maximizing our profits, securing our standing in society, on chasing after luxury?

Or will we use our time and efforts and energy on true riches, things of eternal significance?

Will we use the resources at our disposal to take care of people? To bless and heal those around us who are created in the image and likeness of God?

PEOPLE are God's eternal treasures. In the final analysis, perhaps this is why the dishonest manager came out as the hero, because he did what he could to take care of his neighbors and to build good relationships with them.

Every single day, you and I have multiple chances to do the same thing. And that is one sure way to show that we are devoted to God, and loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. May it ever be so among us. Amen.