

Pentecost 20C
Peace, Seattle
September 18, 2016
Luke 16:1-13, Amos 8:4-7

THE ECONOMICS OF JUSTICE

The lyrics of the Bob Dylan song “YOU’VE GOT TO SERVE SOMEBODY” go like this:¹

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You’re gonna have to serve somebody
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody

If Dylan is right, that “we all got to serve somebody,” Jesus reminds us, in today’s gospel, that the decision of whom we will serve comes with consequences.

Today’s parable from Luke has always been a puzzler. Like an E. M. Escher drawing, it both fascinates and confuses.

You won’t find the story in any of the other gospels—only here—where Luke couples it with warnings about wealth that end with the summary statement in verse 13:

No slave can serve two masters; for the slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth.

And it’s no real surprise that we find this teaching here, for the wealthy and poor alike are never more visible in the New Testament than they are in Luke’s gospel.

- The word for “poor” is found twice as often in Luke than the other gospels;
- References to widows are three times more frequent than in Matthew and Mark combined.
- Luke even has his own specialized vocabulary for describing the poor and needy—vocabulary the other gospel writers lack.²
- Likewise, terms for the rich or wealthy are far more common in Luke than in Matthew, Mark, and John, and they inevitably carry a negative connotation.³

Before Jesus is even out of the womb, we hear on his mother Mary’s lips (chap. 1) the lyrics of a song that praises the God who brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly; who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty.⁴

The critique in our first reading that the prophet Amos levels against Israel’s 1% for taking advantage of the 99% finds a sympathetic ear in Luke’s gospel.

The Jesus we meet in Luke doesn’t shy away from the economic and social disparities that afflicted the world in his time and place, and neither should we.

¹ <http://bobdylan.com/songs/gotta-serve-somebody/>. We like the Natalie Cole’s version the best: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MTnwzFTRM>

² Those terms include *πενιχρος*, *θραυω*, and *ατιμαλωτος*. Cited in an unpublished paper by Erik P. Kindem, *The Parable of the Unjust Steward*. 1982.

³ Of the 15 times *πλουσιος* (rich) is used in the synoptics, 11 are in Luke—a whopping 73%! Cited in *ibid*.

⁴ *The Magnificat*, Luke 1:46-55

But in order to clearly understand the context of today's reading more clearly, says Barbara Rossing, we need a little mini-course on the economics of Roman-occupied Galilee.⁵

- In this 1st century world, rich landlords and rulers were loan-sharks who used exorbitant and often hidden interest rates to disinherit peasants of their family land and amass more land for themselves. This was done in direct violation of the Torah.
- They used creatively underhanded ways to maximize interest to the point where these hidden interest rates appear to have been as high as 25 percent for money and 50 percent for goods.⁶
- Clearly both the rich man of the parable and his debt collector, were exploiting desperate peasants.

By reducing the debtors' payments, the steward may simply have been foregoing his own cut of the interest. Or he may have woken up to what the law of God commands—forgiving all the hidden interest in the contracts. Whatever the case may be, his motivation is crystal clear: having already gotten the pink slip from his boss, he needs a place to land. And in the end even the boss marvels at his cleverness.

Jesus, too, seems to commend the steward's creativity—his own disciples could make good use of “street smarts” like that—being “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” But in no way does Jesus endorse the unjust practices that undergird this story; and, as the verses that follow make clear, he doesn't want us to either.

Contemporary analogies about economic exploitation abound.

Not long ago our friend Brenda—the one who inspired us to build a raft for seal pups—was forced to find alternate housing when her new landlord raised her rent 300%. Brenda was able to find another apartment close by, but one of her neighbors was not so fortunate.

This man, who struggled mightily with life, when forced to leave his close network of friends, decided that life was not worth living anymore.

But skyrocketing rents and high levels of debt are much more than personal issues, they are global issues.

The debt terms that have been forced upon some developing countries by wealthy neighbors are so oppressive that the Lutheran World Federation has labeled them “illegitimate” and likens the debt itself to “violence” because of its crushing effects on people's futures. Rev. Àngel Furland, coordinator of LWF's debt program in Latin America calls the debt system “modern slavery.”⁷

Beginning with his first public sermon and throughout his ministry Jesus invokes the biblical concept of Jubilee and debt forgiveness.⁸ Greed binds hearts and steals souls, rendering God's dream for an equitable future null and void.

No wonder Brother Martin calls wealth the “most common god on earth.”⁹

⁵ In what follows I borrow heavily from Dr. Barbara Rossing's article on this text found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2982

⁶ Cited by Barbara Rossing. William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, p. 246.

⁷ Cited by Barbara Rossing. Rev. Àngel Furlan, coordinator of the illegitimate debt program for LWF member churches in Latin America, referred to the debt system as “modern slavery.” See the 2013 report at <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/just-and-sustainable-future-without-illegitimate-foreign-debt>

⁸ Luke 4:16ff. Sharon Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) xiv

⁹ *Large Catechism*, Explanation of the First Commandment, cited by Rossing. She points out that what concerned Luther most in the sixteenth century may have been the emerging capitalist system's system of charging interest on loans. See Terra Rowe, “Protestant Ghosts and Spirits of Capitalism: Ecology, Economy, and the Reformation Tradition,” *dialog* 55 (2016), note 27, p. 60. See also “*Radicalizing Reformation, Provoked by the Bible and Today's Crises*,” <http://www.radicalizing-reformation.com>.

In coming weeks our Bible readings will revisit this issue of the role of wealth and its attendant dangers. Next week we'll meet the rich man and Lazarus and hear from St. Paul warnings about what happens when the love of money becomes the driving force of our lives. A month later we'll meet a tax collector named Zacchaeus who discovers what it's like to be freed from that compulsion.

So the conversation continues.

There's a lively debate playing out in Seattle right now about the best strategies for addressing homelessness. There's no single solution to this complex issue, and no single strategy we as people of faith are compelled to endorse, but our voices belong in the debate.

And we offer not only our voices.

- We offer this building to host Mary's Place families;
- we offer sandwiches for Angeline's Shelter, and give them away in White Center parking lots;
- we bring food contributions from our cupboards for the Food Banks we support;
- and monetary gifts to address acute needs through our AGAPE FUND.
- Inspired by our confirmands, we combined mind, muscle, and money to build the Tiny House that's on our patio.

All of these actions are examples of doing God's Work with Our Hands. Alongside all of them we need to offer our voices as well—in chorus with others—to say that in Seattle, one of the nation's fastest growing cities with median incomes that far outstrip national averages, permanent housing for those who have no homes, and affordable housing for working families, is not beyond our reach to accomplish.

IT'S TIME TO FOLLOW JESUS into the places where economic questions and practices and policies are being discussed and enacted; to ask how we can practice neighbor love in our economic relationships, restructuring public policy in order to serve the common good.

When we come to the Table today, we come for release from all that binds us.

And what we receive alongside these gifts of grace is a commission. A commission from Christ to use our highest intellect, our best instincts, and the most creative strategies we can muster to retool the systems of our community so that the needs of the poor and exploited will no longer be sidestepped or ignored.

Whoever is faithful in a very little, says Jesus, is faithful also in much. Let's take what we have—let's start there—and through the power given to us by the Holy Spirit let's show the world what following Jesus can look like.

Amen.