

Proper 20C  
Peace, Seattle  
September 22, 2019  
Amos 8:4-7, Luke 16:1-13

## **THINKING IT OUT AGAIN**

He's one of the most memorable characters in Charles Dicken's tale OLIVER, and his name is FAGIN.

Guardian of homeless boys who've found themselves cast on the streets of London, he's 2-parts clever, 1-part kind, and all parts survivor. In creating the role for both Broadway and film, actor Ron Moody said Fagin's character ought to be more than one-dimensional—he ought to be sympathetic. And he succeeded.

Because of his “benevolence” the boys under his wing gain some sense of security—a place off the streets and out of the cold where they can consider themselves at home and part of the family. But in exchange they must give him both their loyalty and their nimble fingers:

♪ ***“You’ve got to pick a pocket or two, boys, you’ve got to pick a pocket or two!”***

The SYSTEM as constructed hasn't worked for FAGIN—CLASS TENSIONS and the ACCIDENTS OF BIRTH are a central core of Dicken's work—but he's figured a way around that by becoming a fence for stolen goods—and a good one at that!

**He's what St. Luke might call a “steward of unrighteous mammon”; somehow, in the end, he always finds his way out of a jam.**

If you remember the story, you'll recall how FAGIN takes all the wallets and watches and jewelry his “artful dodgers” filch on the street, and converts them, bit-by-bit, into the most concentrated and portable wealth of all: diamonds.

But at the climax of the story, as he flees from the posse that's come after his murderous partner, Bill Sikes, Fagin stumbles and falls—scattering those brilliant, beautiful gems into the slime and muck that engulfs the slum house he's called home. Fagin is forced to start over again and to wonder if he has the capacity to change. As the scene ends, he goes out singing...

♪ ***I am reviewing the situation, and I think I'd better think it out again.***

**Today's parable from Luke is a head scratcher; the kind of story that—just when you think you got it figured out—forces you to think it out again!** The truth is, Bible scholars have tried deciphering this parable for centuries, and their explanations are all over the map.

- Is the rich man of the parable the God figure? Or is the shrewd manager—who forgives debts all over the place—in the God role?
- Is Jesus telling this story with tongue in cheek? Or is he being straight with us?
- Does he really want us to model ourselves after the “Fagins” of the world? Or are we supposed to make a distinction between what to do in times of crisis, and what to do at other times?
- Are we being called to pursue friendships based on quid-pro-quo—you scratch my back I'll scratch yours? Or is Jesus' irony meant to point us in the exact opposite direction—away from the false security of shallow friendships and toward the true security of richness in faith?

## Strange stuff, this parable!

If the parables Jesus told are meant to jar us, to shake up our assumptions, to alter our understanding of reality; if they're designed to surprise and even perplex us—to make us think about God and life and faith differently...then how are we to make sense of today's parable?

**I'm not sure.**

Maybe it has something to say about what happens at the intersection between God's reign and the world of money.

Maybe these verses are simply another way for Jesus to say that no circumstance, no matter how seedy, no person no matter how compromised their life, and no issue where money is involved, is beyond the boundaries of our ongoing conversation with God...

That God's claim on the world—and us—extends even to this questionable realm of material wealth—how we make it, and how we use it once it's made.

**That seems to be what the prophet Amos is talking about.**

He rails against the ethics of the grain merchants: Trampling on the needy, treating the poor like commodities, ignoring the homeless. DO YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON, says the LORD? DO YOU THINK YOUR MOTIVES ARE HIDDEN FROM ME?

If AMOS were prophesying today, there's no doubt in my mind that he'd be calling on governments, corporations—indeed all of us—to account for the way we're treating our planet home—this GIFT, this JEWEL we're scumming up—and the toll it's taking.

If AMOS were prophesying today, he'd be talking not only about systemic injustice and the growing gap between rich and poor, but also CARBON FOOTPRINTS.

The generation of activists that marched on Friday is beginning to awaken; and as they awaken they're holding up a mirror to the supposed adults in the room—the movers and shakers and decision makers, yes—but you and me too—and saying:

DENIAL ISN'T WORKING ANY MORE! THE STATUS QUO ISN'T FUNCTIONING! ENOUGH WITH WORSHIPPING THE GNP! WE NEED CHANGE. WE NEED TO TAKE ACTION TO PRESERVE THIS EARTH, TO PRESERVE THE AIR AND WATER AND SOIL ON WHICH EVERY CREATURE DEPENDS!<sup>1</sup>

If the God Jesus reveals to us is a God for whom every aspect of life matters; if the One we call LORD commends the craftiness of serpents while holding us to a higher standard of innocence; if our God is a God who welcomes sinners while commanding us to make an about-face from the road we're on...

THEN, dear friends, there can be no doubt that this God is not content to have just a piece of us...  
**NO, he wants the whole enchilada!**

**This is precisely the God we meet in Jesus Christ. The one who, in giving himself freely for the sake of the world, forever changed our methods of accounting.**

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<sup>1</sup> A leader in the growing global activism is 15 year old Greta Thunberg of Sweden, who on 9/23/19 spoke at the United Nations summit on climate change: <https://archive.org/details/thunberg-un-summit-speech>

**If we aren't reviewing the situation; if we aren't ready to stop picking the pockets of the generations ahead of us, then we'd better think it out again.**

**For the God who shows his face in Jesus calls us to urgent action for the sake of this world he so loves with at least as much shrewdness and savvy and tenacity as all those entities that would stake their claim on the resources of this world.**

Amen.