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Proper 20C
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Luke 16:1-13

TAKING RISKS

I invite you to pull out your Bible, if you brought one, or one the pew rack in front of you, and open it to Luke 16, verse 1, the Parable of the Dishonest Steward or Manager.

This baffling parable about a dishonest manager reminds me of an MC Escher drawing. Escher is that Dutch graphic artist who has captivated millions with drawings that depict impossible situations:

- Waterfalls that defy gravity,
- stairways that lead perpetually up or down, but never get anywhere,
- castles whose designs breaks the laws of physics.

This parable is like that. It draws us in, and suddenly becomes an enigma, a maze, a puzzle we can't solve. By the end of it we're left shaking our heads, wondering if we heard Jesus right.

A rich man learns that his manager is cheating him, so he calls in the manager, confronts him, and tells him to clean out his desk.

The manager is forced to do some serious soul-searching as he considers his alternatives. The plan he comes up with is to reduce the debt load of all the people who owe his master, thus ingratiating them to himself.

The twist of the parable comes when the boss finds out his manager has "cooked the books." **Instead of condemning him, he commends him!** And what's more, Jesus seems to do the same! What a bewildering story!

We could, I suppose, try to explain the tensions, twists and turns in this chapter by imagining St. Luke sitting at this writing desk with a big pile of "Jesus-saying" note cards and one enigmatic parable. (…By the way, Luke is the only writer to include this parable in his gospel.)

The sayings are all about wealth—its proper use or abuse, a theme central to Jesus' message in Luke. But each approaches the topic from a slightly different angle, and their relationship to one another is not transparently clear.

What's a gospel writer to do?

Take a close look at chapter 16, vvs. 8b–13, & you see what appears to be Luke's solution:

- teachings on money and wealth unmoored from their original context, placed one after another;
- each saying providing a different lens for looking at our parable;
- and each saying adding an interpretive twist to the parable.

The effect is that we're given at least three different options for understanding the parable proper.

(1) The first sermon based on verses 8 and 9 from today's story might admonish us to be wise in our dealings with that slippery commodity the Bible calls "unrighteous mammon."

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(2) The next sermon, based on verses 10-12, could be one based on financial stewardship:
We must learn to be faithful with worldly wealth so that someday we will know how to be faithful with the spiritual riches that really matter.

(3) Then there's a third sermon theme surfacing in verse 13: There's a choice to be made.
No slave can serve two masters. We must choose, and choose wisely. Keep our priorities straight; keep God first.

Three different sermons, three different conclusions to this parable; and by putting all of these sayings of Jesus at the end of this parable, Luke seems to suggest that all three are lively possibilities.

Yet…*none* of these approaches seems to get at the real bite of the story—a dishonest manager commended for his ability to stay alive. The enigma remains.

There's a kind of reckless, bold, even risky action being commended here, and we Lutherans are not necessarily the sort of people that perform that sort of action very well!

BUT what if *that's* exactly what Jesus is up to? What if he's *trying* to surprise us / disrupt us? What if he wants us to be bold, to take risks? What if he's trying to get across that it's not our respectability that saves us, but God's grace—a grace that is always amazing and surprising and over the top?

What if the question beneath it all—between the lines—is:
WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO RISK TO LIVE FOR THE REIGN OF GOD?

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To be a follower of Jesus is to understand that…
- no circumstance no matter how seedy,
- no person no matter how compromised their life,
- and no issue in the material world, is beyond the boundary of our ongoing conversation with God.

God's claim on the world, and on us, includes even the dubious realm of money—God cares about how we make it, and what we do with it once it's made.

Isn't that, after all, 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?

- **If our God is a God** who calls for justice in the marketplace as well as the personal space;
- **If our God is a God** who commends the craftiness of serpents while at the same time calling his community to a higher standard of innocence. [Matt 10:16]
- **If our God is a God** who welcomes all kinds of sinners, eating with them in their homes, and setting a place for them at his own Table…
- **…then**, dear friends, **our God is a God** who will never be content with a little slice of our lives—he wants ALL of us—the good, bad and the ugly.

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This is precisely the God we meet in Jesus.
One who calls us to meet the challenges of mission in the 21st century with at least as much wisdom and tenacity and cleverness as the street smart survivors of this world.

What might that kind of risk-taking for the gospel look like? How creative and thoughtful can we be? How deeply and daringly can we live the welcome? Isn't that worth exploring?

After all, we can't out-risk God!

God put it all on the line when he came to us in Jesus. God risked it all, and even death itself could not defeat God's plan to bring healing to the world.

God in Christ is here again once more this morning, calling us, inviting us, coaxing us, offering us yet another chance to be in a relationship with Him. To put our trust in him. To find in him alone our true source of security.

How will we respond? Amen.