

Sun Sep 18, 2022 Proper 20

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I remember during the big winter storm of 2021 how our block on our street responded. We all got each other's cell phone numbers and created a single big text thread so that we could keep up with one another and help each other out.

Vitaly and I shoveled our neighbors sidewalks and driveways. When our water stopped, our neighbors would fill up the five gallon buckets we would walk over to them. Our little street was full of mutual gift-giving and mutual support.

This is often the case in an emergency. We rise to the occasion, as we say.

And there was an emergency coming at the time of Jesus as well. And Jesus, as prophet, knew it was on the way, predicted it, and warned it. Rome was about to call the loan, so to speak, on allowing Judea and Judeans throughout the empire to have a unique relationship to their God and to have relative independence of government. Rome was about to come crashing down.

Jesus wants all Israel to rise to the occasion. But he doesn't want them to wait until the emergency, he wants them to start, now. Jesus wants them to do what they ought to have been doing from the start: working in the kingdom of heaven. He wants them, he wants us, to enter back into a relationship of mutual gift-giving and mutual support that defines the the kingdom of heaven.

Our gospel passage this morning is a difficult one. This parable is just hard to understand. There are a lot of ways to look at it, but I will share with you what I have found helpful.

Remember Jesus' context. He is preaching to Galileans and Judeans who are currently under foreign, imperial rule. They do not have their own independence and freedom as a nation.

Some of their own countryfolk, in order to survive, or even to just take advantage of the situation, have set up positions where they can side with or administer on behalf of the Roman occupation and exploit and even extort their own people. A chief example of this would be tax collectors. Let's use that as a way in.

There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So, he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.'

It would be easy for Jesus' listeners to imagine a situation where a tax collector might suddenly, as still just another foreigner, come to odds with his Roman overlord, where he has fallen out of favor, where he is seen as no longer useful.

Jesus is saying that this is coming for all of Israel. For all those in Galilee and Judea who are colluding with Rome and taking advantage of their position with these foreign occupiers, Jesus is saying, the time is inevitably coming when this rich man, Rome, is going to see them, tax collectors and other colluders, as squandering the trust they had been given. And then Rome will turn on them, and no one will be there to save them.

Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.'

The manager, the tax collector, has lived a cushy life doing Rome's dirty work. Now that life is about to be taken away. He has enjoyed a certain station in life by being associated with the powerful oppressors. When they remove their backing, he will be hated by his own people, and have nowhere to turn. Scary, right?

'I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'

Like our winter storm, the tax-collector is about to experience a real emergency in his life! So, he cooks up a plan. A plan to do what he ought to have been doing from the start: working in the kingdom of heaven.

So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'

Do you see what is going on here? This is a brilliant plan. The tax collector has figured out how to get back on good terms with those whom he had previously colluded with Rome to oppress!

When you are in debt, and someone releases you from it, it is the same thing as receiving a gift. The tax collector is giving the only gifts that he knows how. He is giving the gift of, at least some relative freedom from the oppression his fellow Israelites are

under – oppression he had previously imposed. He is forgiving them their debts, as he would like them to forgive his debts.

The tax-collector decides to enter back into mutual-gift giving and mutual-support, the kind we give one another in emergencies, right away, before his emergency hits him. He is deciding to enter back into a relationship of mutual gift-giving and mutual support that defines the most important thing in Jesus' teaching: the kingdom of heaven. He is leaving behind the kingdom of this world – in this case, in his day and age – Rome. And he is returning to the Kingdom of God, the life of the age to come.

He can hope, when his power and source of wealth is stripped of him by the foreign occupiers, that he will be welcomed back into the homes of his own people whom he had previously betrayed.

Jesus is giving sound advice, in this parable, to his fellow Israelites. For, you see, there is coming a time – and indeed it did – when Rome is going to prosecute all of Israel, Galileans and especially Judeans, for squandering the trust Rome had placed in their local authorities to govern on behalf of Rome. And, when you don't do what Rome wants, well then, you know what happens. It doesn't turn out good. And, in the end, the Temple was destroyed, and eventually, Jews were forbidden even to set foot in the promised land.

Jesus knows this is coming and, through this parable, he is giving his fellow countryfolk sound advice: start to forgive one another any debts – real or imagined! Let it go. Forgive and be forgiven. Enter back into a relationship of mutual gift-giving and mutual support that defines the kingdom of heaven. Declare the acceptable year of the Lord. Declare that the Lord's Jubilee year has come. Return to a kingdom of gift, of mutual support, the Kingdom of God.

Now if the parable wasn't weird enough, it gets even more weird here.

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.

What? Isn't the owner being robbed by the manager. Wouldn't this make him even more angry? Wouldn't he prosecute him? Or, if Rome, wouldn't he persecute him?

But remember how tax collectors made money. They made money by skimming off the top. Rome would tell the tax collector what they were expecting, and the tax collector would charge a "fee" for collection that would go into his own pocket.

The manager, the tax collector, didn't tell them to take their bills and mark them down to zero. He had them mark them down from a hundred to half that, to fifty; from a hundred down a fifth, to eighty. In other words, he cancelled his own surcharge! The owner, Rome, still got paid what he was expecting. So the owner and the manager walk away on the level, Rome can't find anything on the tax collector when the tax collector finally walks away from his exploitative job.

For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

The children of light, who are slugging it out under oppression, trying to make an honest buck, living mite to mite because they won't cheat their neighbors, have something to learn from the shrewdness of this down-and-out tax-collector:

Forgive other folks their debts to you – real or imagined – and you will be forgiven. Enter back into mutual gift-giving, mutual

support: enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Preach the acceptable year of the Lord, the Lord's jubilee, the forgiveness of debts.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

In a few moments we will come to God in prayer.

In prayer, we will ask for God's forgiveness.

We will bring up our offerings of bread and wine. We will bring up our offerings of tithes and money. We will recall to God our commitments of time and talent to the church and to the Lord's service.

We will give thanks for all these things.

Then we will say the prayer that Jesus taught us: forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Then we will walk up to take the bread of life and the cup of salvation. We will ask God to welcome us into the eternal homes.

We will act out, in ritual, this parable. And through it, God will give us more than we could ask for or imagine.

We will, by means of this ritual, enter back into a relationship of mutual gift-giving and mutual support that defines this sacrament of the kingdom of heaven.

Then minutes later the clergy will dismiss you to go into the world in peace, in the power of the spirit, to love and serve the Lord. In

this ritual action we do as Christians, we will receive the grace to live the Christian life to which we have been called.

So that this next week, the rest of our lives, we will continue to come to God in prayer.

We will continue to notice when we have wronged others, and promptly admit it.

We will bring to God the fruit of our life and labor; will we remember to give thanks, to develop an attitude of gratitude.

We will pray the Lord's prayer every day and mean it. We will remember how he taught us that if we forgive other's their debts to us, that we in turn will find forgiveness in that very act.

We will break bread with those God has given us as neighbors. We will welcome them into our homes.

Like we do in emergencies, like many of us did during that winter storm of 2021, we will rise to the occasion. We will live, in our lives, this parable of our Lord. But we won't wait till the next emergency. We will start now, today.

We will, in our daily lives, return to what we had always been called to do; we will enter back into a relationship of mutual gift-giving and mutual support that defines the most important thing in Jesus' teaching: the kingdom of heaven; the life of the age to come.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. Amen.