

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

September 22, 2019
Proper 20C / Ordinary 25C / Pentecost +15

The readings this week:

- Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1 ◦ Psalm 79:1-9
- 1 Timothy 2:1-7 ◦ Luke 16:1-13

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

What Are We to Make of the Dishonest Manager?

It is a difficult parable before us now. If you've read it, of course you already know that.

Indeed, as I kept returning to Jesus' words over these last several days, I have found myself thinking perhaps this is a sermon illustration gone awry.

Preachers, you know what I mean. I can't count the number of times I have told a story trying to make a particular point, only to have people leave worship having heard something entirely other than what I was trying to convey.

So I can't help but wonder now if this is what happened here. Or did Jesus actually say something different than what was actually later recorded? Was he trying to get something across which was just too complex for his listeners to comprehend and later pass along to us?

It's hard to say. What I do know is this. Most weeks I glance through my commentaries and if I'm stuck I might dip into the thoughts of other preachers in their blogs to see if something might spark my imagination. This week? Everywhere I look, everyone agrees that this one is tough. And then everyone seems to head off in a different direction. It is tempting to jump to the end of this Gospel reading and simply expand upon one of what appears to be Jesus' explanation of the story before us now. It wouldn't be so hard to preach on the one verse where Jesus asserts that we can't serve both God and wealth. In fact, as I look through my old sermon file, I see that's precisely what I've done before. This time though, the story Jesus tells just won't let go of me. Even if I don't understand exactly why he tells it..

And so I read it and I read it again and I keep trying to find a parallel somewhere in my life experience and everything I come up with doesn't seem to quite work. Even so? Let me share where my memory has taken me this week --- back to a time when I felt a little like the 'dishonest manager' before us now.

My summer job in college was working the night shift at a local cannery. I worked pea pack and corn pack both and like a lot of college students, I relied on that work to help put me through college.

During a class my freshman year I learned that the very company which was helping me pay for college expenses

was also exploiting workers in Mexico.

In a very real way at the age of 19 I felt like I was a part of this great wrong. And yet, this was good work and such opportunities were limited for 19-year-olds. I struggled greatly with this, believing if I were somehow strong enough I would quit. But then what? Not unlike the main character in today's parable I told myself I was not tall enough to de-tassel corn and I was too proud to not work at all. In the end, I convinced myself that I was only 19 after all and I was on the lowest end of this massive, complex corporation. More than that, I reasoned that one day when I had more resources, more power, more voice, I would do try to something about this -- that I would try to make right what I knew was so wrong. I offer this now, not entirely certain that I have followed through with that pledge at all...

Indeed, as I sit with the story Jesus shares today, there is but one thing I know for sure. Every single one of us does try to serve both God and wealth. How can we not? Wealth of one sort or another is essential for life -- at least in the world I live in. And like the manager in the story today our relationship with wealth is complicated. Sometimes we squander the gifts, to be sure. At other times, we make it work for us in whatever ways we have to. And sometimes, like this manager, in some small way we realize that these gifts do put us in relationship with one another and we try to make right what can often be wrong. But even then, like the manager, our motives may be at least partly self-serving.

So I have to say that I don't think the manager in the story Jesus tells really got it right and I don't really think Jesus is commending him even as he comments on his shrewdness. And no, I don't really know why Jesus tells this story, but I do know this. Two thousand years later it is still pressing in on us and is raising important questions about the place of wealth in our lives. And maybe that alone puts us on a path of repentance and renewal as it forces us to at least examine what we might otherwise take for granted.

A college class did that for me more than thirty years ago. Whatever else may be true, I have never seen things simply again. Oh, I expect I get it almost right from time to time. Often I don't. Either way, even if I am only asking the questions, somehow I expect that is getting me closer to the place where Jesus is calling us to today. But even then, at least for me, it all begins and ends in self-examination and repentance and seeking to start anew. And maybe that is where Jesus finally intended to take us all along.



Reflecting on the Word



___ 1st Reading: [Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1](#)

What was the cry of Jeremiah's heart as he contemplated the judgments he was announcing? What was God's answer to Jeremiah's pleading? What was Jeremiah's fervent wish for Israel? Why did Jeremiah want to separate himself from his people, in spite of his sadness for them? The prophet Jeremiah and the poet Asaph can see that exile is looming because it is too late for repentance. Now they are asking, "How long, O Jehovah? Will You be angry forever?" Have you ever felt God was angry at you? Through Christ, God has promised us forgiveness, how do you see that forgiveness play out in your life? [My-ccm.com](#), [Daily Bible Study](#)

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 79:1-9](#)

How was the Lord's temple violated? How were the Israelites persecuted? How was the nation of Israel viewed by her neighbors? What did the Israelites think was preventing God from acting on their behalf? What did the Israelites ask God to do on their behalf? How are Israel's enemies, described? Why did the Israelites need God's mercy? Why was Asaph crying out to God? How was his situation desperate? In what times or ways do you feel desperate for God's help? [Christian Computer Ministry](#), [Deborah H Bateman](#)



Total poverty is more than this. ["having no more than, and being able to call on no more than, the poorest worker"]. It is poverty of Spirit which you, Lord Jesus, said was blessed. that makes every - absolutely every - material thing a matter of complete indifference, so that we can brush everything aside, break with everything ... This is the poverty that leaves no attachments at all to temporal things, but completely empties the heart, leaving it whole and entirely free fro God alone. God then refilled it with himself, reigning in it alone, filling it wholly with himself, and putting into it - though not for itself, but for himself, for his own sake - love for all men, his children.

The heart then knows nothing and holds nothing but these two loves. Nothing else exists for it any longer, and it lives on earth as though it were not there, and in continuous contemplation of the only real necessity, the only Being, and in intercession for those whom the Heart of God longs to love.

Charles Foucauld 1858-1916
The Spiritual Biography of Charles de Foucauld

Praying Toward Sunday

Masters,
two and more,
competing for our money
clamoring for our time
creating chaos in our lives.
Master,
one God,
quiet us and draw us near.

~ Katherine Hawker, [Liturgies Outside](#)

___ 3rd Reading: [1 Timothy 2:1-7](#)

What advice would you give a child if he or she asked you how to pray? Given his context, why do you think the writer is calling to pray for people in high positions, rather than to them? Why is it still important for us to pray for people in high positions? How does someone go about offering various types of prayers for "everyone?" What do you think the writer means by "a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity" and in what ways might that concept have changed over the centuries? In verse 7, the writer interrupts the flow of words to reassure us that "I am telling the truth..." Why do you think that such an aside is necessary and in what ways do you think that such assertions affect the way people react to the message they are hearing? If prayer truly changes things, for what and who do you think it most important to pray in the weeks and months ahead and why? [Faith Element](#)

___ 4th Reading: [Luke 16:1-13](#)

What situation do we find ourselves, right here and now, in which we have a choice? What is preventing us from making it? Are possessions, in fact, possessing us? What has the rich man discovered about his manager? What is the manager's response at being found out? What is the scheme he has come up with? Why do you think the rich man "commended" his manager? In verse 9 Jesus is saying we could take a lesson from the dishonest manager. I wonder what lessons do you think he means for us to take? Whom else might Jesus have been addressing with this story? Jesus says we will not be able to serve two masters. "You cannot serve God and wealth." How have you have found this to be true? How is it possible to be wealthy and still serve God? How this story would be the same or different if Jesus told it today? [Lesson Plans that Work](#)

