

“Mutual liberation”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Luke 16:1-15

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Jesus has some really lovely sayings: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you;” or “Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow;” or “Love your neighbor as yourself.” What we just read... not one of them: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.” Yeah, never seen that one stitched on a pillow.

Scholar Phyllis Tickle calls this story “the most difficult parable of them all.” It’s so difficult that Luke provides not one, but four separate interpretations. Did you catch them all?

The first one tells the disciples to act more prudently; be wise as serpents, Jesus says elsewhere.

The second one tells them to use wealth to make friends.

Third, how we use earthly wealth says a lot about how we deal with God’s riches. If I hoard my wealth and use it to hurt others, what do you think I’m going to do with the gospel?

Finally, we can have only one lord; to obey God we must give up all other allegiances, including economic security.

The problem is that none of these interpretations resolve the fact that Jesus has praised a guy who basically just cheated on his tax returns.

This is a man who comes from the real world. He’s no hero. He’s just a regular guy in middle management trying to make it in a harsh world.

He works for a loan shark, a rich landlord who is using exorbitant interest rates, much like our own payday loan franchises, to drive the poor deeper into debt and take their land—all in violation of biblical law, which forbids charging interest on loans.

Maybe our manager has been skimming off the top, or maybe he’s just not good at his job, or maybe those peasants are trying to get him fired. The text does not say. But whatever the reason, the master—*kyrios*, lord, the man who would presume himself god over these people—says he’s going to throw the manager out.

And so our manager does something that doesn’t seem too scrupulous. He cuts people’s debts so that they owe him one. He cheats his master (though some scholars think he simply removes his own commission). He wraps his self-interest in the shiny paper of compassion.

Doesn't sound very Christian, does it? But it does sound practical. "Shrewd" is the word used in our text today. Why do you think Jesus would want to tell a story about a man who shrewdly protects his self-interest?

Personally, I think it's because Jesus knows us. He knows that we are not nearly as good, nearly as committed as we like to think. When he tells this story, he's on his way to Jerusalem. He's on his way to the cross. After that, it's going to be up to the disciples to carry on his work. It's going to be hard on them. They're going to face persecution and rejection; they're going to get tired and busy; and it's all going to prove a lot more complicated than they ever thought. It's going to be so tempting to give up, to walk away. And if all they're going on are their well-meaning intentions, these children of light... they're not going to make it. Not to the cross, not to kingdom come.

So Jesus tells them a story about a guy who does go all the way, who saves all these other people, taking big risks for them, not because he has any noble intentions but because his very survival is at stake. He knows that without them, he's going to die. He needs them as much as they need him.

When he cancels their debts, their fates become intertwined; they rise together or fall together.

This isn't charity as we know it. It's symbiotic. Mutual. It's selfish service.

It's as if Jesus were telling his disciples—and us—that to follow him in the way of the cross we need more than good intentions; we need skin in the game. That's the only way we persist in carrying the cross to the end, the only way we preach the gospel against all odds, the only way we win racial justice or level poverty or achieve love or forgive the unforgivable—it's by knowing that our lives depend on it.

Forget ideals, Jesus says; this is about survival. You need these people; you need the poor, and the indebted, and the oppressed; you need the skeptical and the resistant; you need the people different from you and the ones who claim to be your enemy. There's no humanity for you without them, and there's no house in heaven without them either. Until they're free, you'll never be.

The world says it is shrewd to "to get yours" and not worry about others. Jesus says the most practical thing you can do is to help others, to labor for their freedom and welfare. Because only in their freedom will you find yours.

I remember some years ago, in seminary, driving from Princeton to Trenton to attend a community organizing event with a friend. The speaker was a prominent African American pastor in the city of Trenton, which years earlier had been gutted by white flight to the suburbs, to places like Princeton. He described his skepticism about the white folks in the room; he'd seen us before, over the years, other well-meaning white folks who came to Trenton with promises of justice and partnership, only to take over the work, then give it up when it got too hard. Over and over again, white folks, came and left, having changed nothing.

He was harsh. He was honest.

What I remember most, though, was the ride back to Princeton. My friend was upset. Why had he given his whole evening, precious studying time, to come to an event where the whole time he was criticized? He didn't have to be there; a little gratitude would have been nice, he said.

I know the feeling. Over the past six months, I have served on Auburn's Downtown Revitalization Initiative. At our first meeting, we noticed that there was no strategy to engage the voices and projects of historically marginalized peoples. So I drafted a strategy. I worked really hard on it. Used time I didn't have. Thought I was doing a good thing. But when I shared my draft with other leaders for their input, the first response was a long email of sharp criticism. I admit that a part of me (a part I thankfully examined and challenged) felt like saying, "Fine! You do it then! I don't need this!"

That phrase right there—"I don't need this. I don't have to be here"—that's the problem, and Jesus knew it. As long as we are just doing this for *them* (whoever "they" are), as long as this is just a nice cause, we will invariably walk away. We'll get tired, or frustrated, or feel taken for granted, or won't like someone, or will want to do something else. As long as white allies think they don't need racial justice just as much as people of color, racial justice will never be achieved. If we're going to persist in justice, or worship, or evangelism, or discipleship, if we really are going to walk with Jesus all the way to that cross, we've got to know what's at stake.

Lilla Watson, an indigenous Australian artist, activist, and scholar, says, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

We are no one's savior. White folks aren't here to save black folks. Christians aren't here to save non-Christians. God's the only One who's doing the saving around here. We're here for one reason: to get saved, together.

And so Jesus tells a story about people working together for their mutual liberation, about people going all the way to salvation because they're bound to each other.

I don't want to be a disciple because it's a nice thing to do. I want to be a disciple because I cannot be free as long as one of my brothers and sisters is held captive, because my soul cannot be well as long as one of them suffer, because I too am captive to this sin and need healing.

I want to be here because there is no life for me but here. With you. All of you.

To remember this, we each have received a stone today, and upon this stone is written a prayer. Somewhere in this sanctuary there is another who bears the same stone, the same prayer, the same fate. May this stone be a reminder that you are bound to one another—that there is no heaven without them, and no freedom either. **Amen.**