Pentecost 15c - Luke 16.1-16

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Wow, y'all, this parable is a bit of a doozy, isn’t it? If you're like me, you found it confusing and befuddling, wondering what does this even mean? What's Jesus talking about? Why is the manager shrewd? Or is he dishonest? Or both?! And why does the master praise the steward for being unjust? It’s so confusing, right?

There are lots of different ways that we could interpret this parable of Jesus. In fact, as I read commentaries, listened to podcasts, dove into books, and talked to colleagues and friends about this parable, every single person had a slightly different interpretation of what's going on here.

So one invitation I want to make is not trying to make sense of this parable. I know that might seem odd, but really, parables are not meant to make sense. Parables are not meant to be explained; parables are meant to be *experienced*.

The parables of Jesus are invitational stories that Jesus tells - that are precisely intended to invite us to pause for a moment, and think and pray and ponder differently than we had before. Parables are meant to make us scratch our heads and wonder what is going on.

Part of the challenge, I think, is that over the course of time - and especially in the last few decades - the focus of parables has become a simple morality statement, something that we can frame and put on the wall. But again, parables are not meant to be explained. Parables are not a simple moral lesson. Parables are an invitation into relationship with Jesus and with each other. Parables are an invitation into a relationship of wrestling with God. Parables are meant to confound us. They’re intended to be a bit shocking and challenging. They are meant to give us pause, so we look at the world in a new way.

Again, I know that might sound strange. But let’s think about some of the other parables, especially in Luke's gospel:

* we have a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go search for just one that is lost
* we have a woman who turns her house upside down looking for a single coin
* we have a father who gives his inheritance to one of his two sons, who squanders it all. And when things are so bad the son comes back, the dad welcomes him back with open arms, a huge hug, and a ginormous party
* we have a parable where the hero of the story is a dreaded Samaritan - in a culture where the relationship between Jews and Samaritans was complicated at best, and fractured and nasty at worst

None of that makes much sense! The parables of Jesus are surprising and challenging. Part of the problem is that over the years, we have simplified them so much that they no longer confound us. Or - perhaps even more disturbing - we have been taught that we are not meant to question the words of Jesus, that we shouldn’t ponder and disagree. We’ve been taught that we need to listen while someone else explains the parable to us.

Well, y’all, I’m not going to explain the parable this morning. Because parables are not meant to be explained; they are meant to be experienced. So I invite us to pause for a moment and to rest in the holy presence of Jesus, to *experience* life with Jesus.

Life with Jesus, y’all! Life with Jesus is all about relationship, about God’s abiding presence with us. Jesus invites us into a relationship of love, peace, grace, mercy, justice, forgiveness, hope. In Jesus, we know the very presence of God almighty. The God who made the whole universe, present in and through Jesus Christ.

In Jesus we know love. In Jesus we are gifted a love so deep, so broad, and so magnificent! A love that is unending, that is everlasting. A love that is present with you right now. Because y'all, you are so loved by God. You are literally loved by God more than life itself, because Jesus died on the cross for you and for me.

You are loved by God so much that Jesus rose from the dead, and in that resurrection, God boldly declares that death does not have the final word. That sin and brokenness, shame and grief will never, ever win the day. In the resurrection of Jesus, God shows that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing, y'all.

*You* are so loved by God. Y’all are so loved by God. All y’all are so loved by God. All humanity and all creation are so loved by God. Love without measure, in abundance, overflowing. Love that draws us all and holds us in relationship with God.

And that relationship, that love has been gifted to us by God simply because God wants to. God loves us simply because God chooses to love us. Not because of anything we have done or not done. Not because of anything we might say or not say. God loves us simply because God does. That is amazing love, y'all! The love of God has been made known to all of us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and that is a gift to us forever.

And there’s more! That gift of love given to us by God is an invitation for us to be in relationship with this phenomenal God, who loves us so much. Our amazing, holy, majestic God who has made us in God's holy image. *You* have been made in God's holy image. There is no one like you in the whole of the universe. You are extraordinary. You have been made in God's holy image, and you are loved by God beyond measure.

And that love of God invites us, draws us, holds us in a relationship with God through Jesus. A relationship of love, grace, mercy, justice, peace, hope, forgiveness. That relationship that we are drawn into with Jesus extends from us and through us to our neighbors, to our world, to our community, to everyone, to all creation.

The expression of how we are to live in that relationship with God is to love God and to love our neighbor. That's what Jesus says when he's asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus says: to love God and to love our neighbor. So the guiding principle, the core value for those who follow Jesus is to love God and love our neighbor.

Love which flows out of the love that God has first given us. Forgiveness that flows out of the forgiveness that God has first given us. Mercy and grace which flow out of the mercy and grace that God has first given us. Justice and compassion which flow out of the justice and compassion which God has first given us.

This relationship that God has with us, in and through Jesus Christ, is at the root of the parable and the gospel narrative that we hear today. Because one of the ways that we can strive to understand this whole pericope, this short snippet of the Gospel, is: Who is the master? Who will you serve? Because, while the beginning of the gospel reading with the parable of an unjust and yet clever steward may be really confusing, the last part of our gospel reading for today is quite clear. Jesus states clearly and emphatically: You cannot serve God and wealth. Period. You cannot serve God and wealth.

I wonder if part of the reason why we might hang out in the confusion about the parable is because this clarity at the end can *really* make us uncomfortable. I will speak for myself in saying that this clear, direct statement of Jesus - You cannot serve God and wealth - makes me very uncomfortable. Because these words challenge me to really consider who is it, what is it that is most important in my life? And not just most important in an abstract way. But what is - who is - most important in guiding the actions and the choices that I make every single day? Am I guided by wealth, by stuff, by money, by materialism? By a culture that says that my value is determined by how much I have? By a culture that speaks of the economy as if it is a living, breathing organism? By a culture that is constantly bombarding me with all the stuff that I could have, with the wealth that I could build, with the things that I could accumulate?

This clear directive of Jesus - You cannot serve God and wealth - makes me uncomfortable because it forces me to really take a look at my own life. To ask myself: Who is the master? Who do I serve? What do I serve? What values ground the decisions and choices that I make every day? What relationships inform the choices and decisions that I make every day? Am I guided by the values of the gospel? Am I guided - every day - by the love of God in Christ jesus? Who is the master in my life - is it God? Is it love, grace, mercy, compassion, peace, justice, hope, forgiveness, new life, abundance, joy, love, grace, mercy? Do I serve God or wealth?

This conversation around wealth is complicated right? Because on the one hand, we need money to be able to survive, to purchase food, to have a roof over our heads, and things like that, right?

But on the other hand: How much is enough? How do we participate in an economic life without falling prey to love or service of wealth? Because, we know - wealth can reel you in. Wealth can be an idol. It can dominate your life and your choices. Wealth can be the master of life. Wealth can be an idol - like a God - if we are not careful.

In her book *The Soul of Money: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Life*, Lynne Twist raises the question of how much is enough. She invites us to ponder how we can learn to be “stewards of money rather than gatherers of money.” In her words, I hear an echo of Jesus’ statement: You cannot serve God and wealth. I hear Jesus challenge us to examine the ways that we engage with money. What values - those of the gospel or those of the world - are going to inform our relationship with money, our relationship with God, our relationships with each other?

I think about this question when I look in my closet. I just swapped out most of my summer clothes for longer sleeves, sweaters, and other fall, cooler weather clothes. As I did that I noted a couple of things:

* I have WAY too many clothes. I can completely fill my closet *and* my dresser - to overflowing - with the clothes of either season. I have too many clothes to really wear.
* Which then made me think about sustainability. And all of the clothes that end up in landfills and our oceans. Yes, I can give clothes to charity, but statistics show that most of those clothes are not actually used by anyone. They end up in the trash - or polluting the glory of God’s creation.
* And then I think about the people who have made my clothes. Are they earning a just and living wage? Are they working in unsafe conditions in a sweatshop, somewhere far from where I notice that horror? Have they been trafficked and are now enslaved in an economic system that does not value their humanity?

I am convicted by Jesus’ words: You cannot serve God and wealth. How are the values of gospel informing the choices that I make around what I buy? Am I falling into the trap of thinking that I need more stuff in order to be fulfilled? That I need to stay “up-to-date” on current fashion trends in order to have worth? Am I actually making daily choices that are centered in love, grace, compassion, peace, mercy, justice, abundance, and hope? When I look in my closet, I don’t think that I am. I cannot serve God and wealth.

I share all of this as an invitation for myself and for all of us, to take seriously and to think deeply about Jesus's statement: You cannot serve God and wealth. God calls us to take that statement seriously and to think about our own lives in relation to Jesus' statement, precisely because we *are* in relationship with God. Our amazing God of love, grace, mercy, justice, hope, and peace.

We are in relationship with God because of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection - that is the reason that we cannot serve God and wealth. Because God has gifted us with love and grace, forgiveness and peace, justice and mercy. God has drawn us into relationship and called us, empowered us, equipped us with the gift of the Holy Spirit to live as God's faithful people. And God knows that we will struggle, that we will not live as God would have us live, that we will continue to be both a saint and a sinner at the same time.

So again we lean into the truth that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, even our own sinfulness. Because God loves us immeasurably. God loves us abundantly, and that relationship informs the way we actually live every day. That relationship informs the choices that we make every day.

The relationship that we have with God in and through Christ Jesus calls us, empowers us, and equips us to love God and to love our neighbor. Because God has first loved us. Because in Jesus Christ, God has named us and claimed us as beloved children. And nothing can ever separate us from that love.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.