

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.18.22

Amos 8:4-7

⁴Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, ⁶buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” ⁷The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was **squandering** his property. ²So 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.’ ³Then 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. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then 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.’ ⁸And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹And 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. ¹⁰“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (447)

You have to know who your friends are. In this world, you have to know. You have to be savvy about it sometimes. Shrewd, in the terms of the parable Jesus told.

We had a disagreement about this at Bible study this week—the word “shrewd,” the quality that might come to be called shrewd, a difference in hearing. One person said shrewd is a bad quality. Another said shrewd isn’t a bad quality.

Sounds about right.

This world is a complicated place. Some of us see something one way. Others see that same thing another way. Sometimes we see something differently than how we saw it just last month, just last week, just yesterday. We’ve eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and we know about both, good and evil. But we can’t always tell them apart. We can’t ever *tease*

them apart. The world is a complicated place, which Jesus knew. Really, Jesus was no stranger to that, wasn't in the least bit squeamish about that.

We can be, but he wasn't.

It's significant that this is a parable Jesus told his disciples.

The prior three parables he told were ones he told to the scribes and the Pharisees.

These, as you might know, were the religiously righteous people of Jesus' day. Given the power of the law and its interpretation, they were "owners" of the order of things, so to speak. They had the power to shame, the power even to punish. They couldn't do what the imperial powers could do. Theirs wasn't a brutal power, but it could be a chilling power—and they had the ear of the empire, as a whole anyway. So, if the cause for their taking offense became great enough, they could bring down some serious punishment on you.

It probably wouldn't come to that.

But it might.

The prior parables Jesus is remembered to have told were to the scribes and Pharisees, these who'd grumbled at the fact that Jesus was enjoying himself a little too much, and with the entirely wrong sort of people, tax collectors, sinners—squandering it, you might say, squandering the wealth entrusted to him.

This (each incident of each little breach) wasn't serious enough to address, eating with someone unclean here, healing someone on the Sabbath there. Each one wasn't that big a deal. Not really. Not really. But taken together, each little incident—a transgression of cleanliness here, a violation of holiness there—it all starts to add up to something significant.

Social order relies on a certain mystification. Everyone has to *believe* in it, to believe in the laws or conventions or people who seem to hold it all together, to *believe* in them as essential to holding it all together. Trouble comes when questions arise or the givenness of things seem to change—that process of being disenchanted, demystified.

For what it's worth, you see this in Shakespeare's plays a lot. When something of the social order goes rogue, it's often echoed with a storm, as if a rupture in the social order will redound to the natural order.

We see it in responses to the queen's death too. Are we still drawn in by the mystical power of the throne and the royal one who occupies it, or are we not? Are we now disenchanted beyond any recovery?

To listen to serious commentators describe for news radio the pageantry of this passing is to hear them rely on terms we almost never hear in the news of current events: mystical, magical, enchanting. Seeing in the public mourning, in the parade of events, the coffin in the cathedral, anything of real and foundational power is to be in a certain state of enchantment—and this can only hardly hold up under a certain sort of critique.

For me, listening to it, was to realize how utterly I fall outside it. But I get it in concept. After all, we need to live together in this world, and this basic challenge requires a belief in some higher order. Otherwise, it's just a matter of one power struggle among us after another. So, we squander anything that lends to social order at our own peril.

See, there was actually quite a lot at stake in Jesus' transgressions, small though they might seem. On the one hand, the scribes and Pharisees were overreacting. On the other hand, they were right to get serious about "firing" him.

The previous three parables he told were to them. One of a lost sheep, one of a lost coin, one a wayward son, all of whom came to be found, came to their senses and themselves, came home. And it was at such as these that there was the greatest joy in heaven. That transgressors came back into righteousness, that breakers of the law and wanderers-away came back into good grace, came back home: this is better even than when no one has ever transgressed.

Such was the point of the parables told to the righteous.

The parable Jesus would now tell was to the disciples.

Luke's gospel always has in mind the church. Not every gospel narrative seems intent on the church, on understanding Jesus as here in part to create the church, to *generate* the church, this a new generation. But Luke, our writer here, will tell not only the story of Jesus' life. He will go on to tell the story of the beginnings of the church—which was not at first a religious institution, was rather a new politics whose organizing principle is love and whose policies were interpersonal relationship. Luke always has this in mind; Luke's Jesus always has this in mind. This means in the Gospel of Luke we get parables that seem to have the church in mind, a people charged with living in the world but doing so as if living amidst the kingdom of God, which wouldn't be easy, which would be quite a trick, because the world is *not* the kingdom of God and it never will be, not at least anytime soon and not at least due to our arranging and managing, not even our most diligent arranging and our most organized managing.

And if you think about, you'll see this impossible dialectic at the heart of so many of our conflicts. Ask a conservative about the "perfectibility of man," and they'll say, "No." Ask a liberal

about the perfectibility of man, and they'll say, "Yes, or at least let's give it a try and a budget line item." Ask a traditionalist about the perfectibility of the world, and they'll say, "No, so we hold to our traditions as they have long held us." Ask a progressive about the perfectibility of the world, and they'll say, "Yes, and I've got a piece in land in Idaho to make it come about. Wanna join my cult?"

Ask a Christian any of these questions, and they'll say, *we'll* say, "No, but we're called to live *as if*. We must accept what is, and must pray to transcend it, work for redemption. We must recognize what is, and maneuver amidst what is, in the hope that God is at work in all things for good and we're empowered with the Holy Spirit to participate in the working of such good. We're called to live amidst the spirit of God *as if*. We're called to live with one another, in care, in deep consideration, in mutual compassion, in real and realized love *as if*. As if any of this will matter. As if any of our meager attempts to win friends and influence people will matter. As if this tiny act of love, as if that puny act of compassion, as if this trivial showing of care, will come to anything at all. Because it probably won't. Then again, it might. You never really know. Yeah, it might, it just might—at least for now, at least for this moment, at least for this experience of being a loving or beloved human. This moment. Right now.

But then there will come tomorrow, and sin will reassert itself, and we'll be back at the work of discerning the will of God for the new problems of the new day.

And it's going to be a big task, as big as the world. It's going to be a task requiring a lot of many, as many as there are problems of this world, things not of love in this world. So, we need to make friends, however that might come to be.

The reasons this parable which Jesus told to the disciples might offend us are the very reasons Jesus knew it would offend us, knew it would offend the first hearers and would offend those of the early church. This manager, who was depleting the wealth of the landowner in order to win the favor of the people who, as of just moments ago, were people he was exploiting: this whole thing seems a little icky. The fact that the manager didn't object to the system of exploitation as long as he was benefitting from it; the fact that he didn't object to this system of exploitation until he was about to be crushed by it: then suddenly he was willing to undermine it: this is all a little icky.

You have to play with a parable.

So, I wonder, if the owner in this parable is the structures of the world, the imperial structures, the religious structures, any such things as hold the social order and enables the allocation of resources and the administering of justice.

And I wonder if the manager is the mediators in this massive system, the ones sent by God to make it all run with a little more hope, a little more grace. Sure, there's still exploitation, but it's exploitation everyone's sort of agreed to. Sure, there are still winners and losers, but it's all so very in place that there's not much anyone can do about it. Let's just make the best of it.

But suddenly the manager is thought to be squandering things, not performing his task by all those tacit conventions and "good-enoughs." Maybe small ways. Maybe transgressing a law here, going soft on a long-settled tradition there. And if this manager is going to be accused of such squandering, and if this will be the reason given for his firing, then he might as well go all the way with it. Go deep. Win back the ones who'd have had every reason to want him fired just like the owner now wants.

Let's go big with the squandering.

The manager has come suddenly to realize who his people actually are, where his loyalty should really lie. He'd aspired to be associated with the likes of the owner. Come to find out, he has a lot more cause for solidarity with the debtors.

The church might wish to be aligned with the owners of the world. It has a lot more cause for solidarity with the exploited of the earth, the debtors, the sinners, the people who have no hope of getting themselves out of the situation they find themselves in, no hope but love. These are our people. These are us.

We at Church on the Hill are about to embark on an attempt akin to this. No surprise, then, I'm of two minds about it. Saddled with two buildings that are beloved in the town, really, in the whole county, but which few people seem to want to join as a church, we need to go out into our little world—Lenox, Berkshire County—and make some friends.

Not so different in Monterey. Not so different anywhere there's a "church" but not much church.

And I'm of two minds about this new attempt because I love the church as church. I love Jesus as the only person I've heard about who consistently and truly takes all the power in the world and all the power beyond the world and uses it to join with the world in solidarity, in love, in gentleness, in kindness. I've tried to do this myself, but I lack most of the power in the world and most of the power beyond the world and, worst of all, most disappointing of all, I am quite

often simply a jerk. I've watched others try to do this—people with good intentions, people with real power. But they fall short too. Jesus is the only one, according to the witness of the Bible and to the witness of certain people infected by the gospel which Jesus brought into the world (people like Deitrick Bonhoeffer, people like J.S. Bach, people like Flannery O'Connor, people like Rosa Parks), who does this with any consistency, and even to his own end. Jesus will harness all this power in service of love even when it will cost him his life.

And it's resulted in this flowering of culture and beauty, architecture, and music. And I can't for the life of me figure out why people don't want to join in solidarity with this Jesus, why people don't want to join the church and share in the effort of being and becoming more human.

I mean, on the one hand, I get it. Of course, I get it. The church has been grotesque. The church has been cheap and flimsy, squeamish and criminal, squandering of what gifts of the spirit it's been given. And it's chased people away.

On the other hand, how can we get better in the ways people whom we've chased away would have us do if they don't join us and help us right the ship as they would have us do?

But they won't. It's simply the reality of things as of now. It is what it is, in the language of now.

Really, it's as if we've been fired.

So, we adapt.

Because our mission isn't just for right now. We have a responsibility to the whole sweep of time. We have these old buildings, beautiful, important. We have a responsibility to the witness they stand for, the many saints who've come before us and devoted themselves to this, which witness manifests in the buildings if nothing else.

So, we adapt. We make some friends. We *buy* them, if necessary.

Do you want to come over to our house and play?

I remember a girl whom I didn't like very much asking me over to her house to play. She had Barbie dolls, so I said yes. She wasn't a very nice person. But maybe my playing with her helped her to get better?

I don't know. I was just in it for the Barbie dolls. I was eight years old. Gimme a break.

Mark just made us a movie for Church on the Hill. Mark, as you may know, is a movie director who has all the necessary equipment tucked away somewhere. He got it all out, set it all up, and focused his lens on people who'd make the case for us. The movie he made, four and half minutes, is perfect, absolutely what we need.

But the making of the case for us had people stressing that the Church on the Hill need not be “just” a church. It can be so much more than that, a performance space, a gathering space for festivals, feasts, family reunions. Which is true, sort of—it need *not* be “just a church.” Unless you believe like I do, that the church is everything, the church is to encompass the whole wide world.

This is why cathedral ceilings will often depict the heavens, the cosmos. It’s because the builders of cathedrals understood that the church is to resemble to whole wide world and beyond, the church in all its iterations is to enact the whole wide world and beyond.

But, turns out, we have more in common with the exploited of the world than we do with the owners of the world. We have more cause for solidarity with those who’ve felt exploited even by us than we do with the holders of real power whom we might have once thought we were among.

I don’t like this parable. But, as of now at least, I get it and hope you do too because that’s one of the crucial points of preaching—that you guys come to some clarity because of something I’ve said.

I don’t like this parable, but at least now I get it, and I get even how to live by it—a living out I might not like but which I can trust as faithful.

So, let’s set aside our squeamishness and deal with the world as it is, and deal with our place in it—this terrible, beautiful world where we are exalted and brought low, this jumbled mess that God so loves.

Let’s go and do likewise.

Thanks be to God.