

Risking the Least Broken Choice [OR What's Self-Interest Got to Do With It?]

Luke 16:1-13

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on September 18, 2022

Once a week, Pastor Ann and I get to hang out at Preacher's Text Study with other Lutheran pastors. Mostly on Zoom, once a month in person, we talk with our colleagues about the Bible verses for the coming Sunday. We play with crazy ideas that would never preach, daring each other with the occasional, "I'll give you a buck if you use that in a sermon." So far, we're all smart enough not to use those things in sermons. And sometimes we encourage each other with a solid, "That'll preach!" Text study is a good way to avoid being a one-sermon wonder – although I've no doubt that you guys would totally be able to name my top favorite sermon themes. It's also a good way to let the Holy Spirit live large, shattering assumptions and mischief-making with the texts. Last week's text study was no exception. You can see why in the parable.

On first blush, Jesus' parable seems to make a mockery of the life that he's been demanding of his followers. The dishonest steward seems to end up okay, even commended by his master for acting shrewdly. Text study conversation went all over the place. Topics jumped quickly from the Mafia, staying Christian, John Wayne, Alcoholics Anonymous, righteous indignation, Puritanism, St. Francis of Assisi, and Robin Hood. One of my colleagues saved the field day with the biblical Greek meanings of "shrewd," most often translated as "wise," and of the word "dishonest" which is the less common translation of that word. More commonly, the Greek word for dishonest is translated "unrighteous." Either way, we're in a bind. Is Jesus' telling us that it doesn't matter how money is managed? That can't be right. If that can't be right, what gets us closer to Jesus' teachings about money throughout the Gospel of Luke?

First century Galilee was occupied by Roman landlords and rulers who were loan sharks, tacking on high interest rates that could never be paid back so that they could acquire family land belonging to peasants when they couldn't repay their

loans.¹ At the time, it was common for landlords and their managers to pad the cost of things, adding 25-50% profit margins to the price.² Meanwhile, Jews had biblical commands about fair loans and debt forgiveness. Debt forgiveness was so much a thing for Jews that every 50 years a Jubilee year was commanded in which people were released from debt, prisoners and slaves were freed, and borrowed property was returned.³ In this light, it's possible that Jesus' parable implicates the master AND the manager. We're not told, but it's possible that the manager was forgiving his percentage of the inflated price which maintained the master's cut while reducing the peasants' costs, leaving nothing for himself. This jives with verse 12, about being faithful with what belongs to another which can also be read as being faithful to what belongs to the peasants.⁴ This reading of the parable lines up with Luke's gospel in other places where Jesus' talks about poverty and wealth but it's unclear enough to keep us guessing.

So, we could argue that the shrewd manager was faithful with his dishonest wealth, sacrificing his own profit margins (not the landlords) so that he can be welcomed by the people he had ripped off when he loses his job. The bottom line is that the manager is commended for acting out of self-interest which also lightened the load of the peasants in debt. Everyone loves a good Robin Hood story – stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, making a bad thing good. But this doesn't quite fit. This story has a different twist to it. The manager quite possibly didn't rob from the rich. The manager robbed from himself for self-preservation. He said it himself in verses 3 and 4, "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. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes."

Self-interest is a powerful thing. Self-interest doesn't pull the heartstrings like stories of self-forgetting or self-sacrificing, like saving someone from a raging river and dying in their place. But self-interest does have its place when it lines up with

¹ Barbara Rossing, Professor of New Testament, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, IL. Commentary on Luke 16:1-9 for Working Preacher. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-3/commentary-on-luke-161-13-2>

² Rossing, *ibid.*

³ Year of Jubilee: <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jubilee.html>

⁴ Rossing, *ibid.*

Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself."⁵ Let's take the real-time example here in Denver of housing unhoused folks. There could be many reasons why housing unhoused people would be important to you:

- You yourself are unhoused and need a place to live.
- You don't want to see people camping on the street because there are no accessible restrooms which causes a public health problem.
- You have a business and want customers to have clear access to your storefront and parking.
- You're tired of taking phone calls at your place of work about unhoused people.
- You feel bad for people who don't have a place to live.
- You don't want to give money to unhoused people at street corners.
- You get the idea.

Uniting the self-interests of all the people who care about this issue can transform isolated self-interest into collective will to actually solve the problem of people who need a place to live.⁶

As Lutheran Christians, we believe that we are simultaneously saint and sinner by our baptisms. Being a sinner means that we're capable of just about anything when left to our own devices in the right set of circumstances for self-preservation. Being a saint also means that we're capable of just about anything given the right set of circumstances and given the power of the Holy Spirit. Turns out that Christians are just as unpredictable as everyone else. Lutheran Christians long ago adopted the phrase, "Sin Boldly." This probably doesn't mean what it sounds like it means. Please don't run out of here today saying that your pastor told you that you can do whatever you want. Sinning boldly means that risks can be taken. If we know that sin is part of how we move through the world, then sinning boldly means taking the least broken choice and taking risks on behalf of God and neighbor.

Jesus' parable isn't metaphorical. Jesus tells this parable about money because it's about money. The manager is trying to save his own skin. His shrewd self-

⁵ Luke 10:25-28

⁶ More on self-interest here: <https://www.faithactionhawaii.org/post/25th-anniversary-reflection-self-interest-means-self-among-others>

interest is lauded in part because he risked a win-win solution that paid off for the people who couldn't afford it any other way. He sinned boldly! He used his own dishonestly gained wealth to find that win-win, to reduce the debt of the very peasants who he hoped would welcome him. It's important to read this parable NOT as if all bets are off and dishonesty is rewarded. But rather, read this parable as if Jesus is saying, "Game on!" Game on faithful people.

Any economic system is susceptible to greed, extreme wealth, and the exploitation of people. We just so happen to live in a capitalist economic structure. Faithful questions about money include:

- Who is profiting, who is massively profiting, and who is being exploited?
- Whose debt is or isn't forgiven? Individual debt? Business debt?
- Whose activities are subsidized with money not their own, and whose aren't, be they individuals or institutions?
- Who is being worshipped? Is it God? Or is it the idol of wealth?

The clearest thing that Jesus says in today's reading is, "You cannot serve God and wealth." It may be said clearly but it's understood as clear as mud.

As God's baptized people, Jesus' teachings about money may honestly and courageously be wrestled with like everything else in life. Whoever said that it's not polite to talk about money or politics did us a disservice because now we're a whole bunch of people who don't know how to talk about money or politics. Talking about money, wealth, and poverty takes honesty and courage. Honesty about our self-interest and the courage to listen to other people's self-interest is a good place to start. And it can even be fun once we get the hang of it. We are freed by Jesus to talk about hard things and risk sinning boldly because we are a forgiven and free people set to work in this world that God so loves which, by definition, means God loves you too.

Thanks be to God. And amen.