

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
18 September 2016

Scripture readings:

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Psalm 79:1-9

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

This guy is a real worm, possibly a slug! *"I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg."* Who's going to come and take this job from him? Nobody. He's not going to do it. And he's brave at squandering somebody else's wealth. If ever there was a cockamamy gospel, this is one. And isn't it interesting that it occurs on the first Sunday of a stewardship program! *[laughter]*

*"Make friends with dishonest wealth."* And here I am painfully aware that I'm speaking to an entirely wealthy congregation. You are! Look at the rest of the world. Stretch your perspective long enough. We are among the wealthiest people in the world, you and I, all of us here. And we learn that we cannot serve God *and* wealth. But there's a strong suggestion in this gospel that we can *use* wealth. I suggest to you that we can use wealth to serve God which is a part of why we have a stewardship program that says one of the ways - not the only way.... I hope you never hear me say, *"The only way you can serve God is by giving your money to the church. The only way you can use your money to serve God is by putting it here."* Did you hear me say that's not what I'm saying? I think it is *a* way and an important way, but my guess is if every last penny of ours isn't used in some way or another to serve God, we're serving wealth instead of God. Got it? We are stewards of all that we have and are as people who are faithful or attempting to be faithful to God.

When we read this extraordinary gospel - and it *is* extraordinary - what do we see here? Well, I certainly do not believe that this will become a chapter in a business ethics text book. *[laughter]* If you know folks who are Bible-thumping biblical literalists, how is it you could cheat your boss and you will be rewarded by your boss for cheating shrewdly? Not in this world! We send people who do this to jail!

So what might this really be about? It's got to be about something. Well, it's not about business ethics. It might have something to do with how we understand wealth. But let's give this another look. What's really going on here with the crooked manager? I suppose if we're honest and we believe what we teach and confess that *"this is my Father's world,"* we believe and teach and confess that God creates the world and everybody in it, and everything belongs to God. We always make the mistake of acting as if it's ours. We are acquisitive perhaps by nature - sinful and unclean and claim God's creation as our own.

This is a fascinating story to make you pause and think about what the real problem with the crooked manager is. Why does he continue to be crooked in a way that will benefit him? He wants to make sure that he has friends who will receive him because he's sure he has been excluded from the circle of his employer. He is going to no more Christmas parties. He is not going home for dinner with the boss. He will not be in that bunch at the golf tee. He will be shunned, he will be separated, he will be imprisoned perhaps. He will be - and this is the great fear, I believe - he will be alone. He will be without a significant human relationship. And the reason he's afraid of that is he has confused his boss's sufficient respect for him to trust him with his property, he has confused that with ignorance and he has treated his boss as a dumbbell and his boss's money as his own. He hasn't engaged in an honest, open and loving relationship with the man who has employed him to do a job, a very highly trusted job. What scares him isn't so much the loss of money but the loss of friendship, the loss of a relationship. And the boss, strangely enough to our ears, commends him for immediately beginning a program of constructing relationships with other people so that he won't be left alone when he is ultimately and surely going to be fired.

*"I have decided to do this so that when I am dismissed as a manager, people will welcome me into their*

*homes. I will make their indebtedness to my boss more palatable, more appropriate, more possible to repay.*” Now I must confess to you that this is probably not what the gospel is saying, but in the life of the church you and I meet people who take a very hard line with scripture and particularly the law. And it must be said in my experience these people are usually found on what we call the far right of religious ideas - very conservative, very strict, very rule-bound. They know what’s right, they know what’s wrong, and they are happy to tell you because they themselves are sure that they are right. Have you ever been there yourself? I have. And then what happens? We encounter ourselves somewhere along the line as imperfect, as flawed, as breakers of the law, as incapable of establishing for ourselves a kind of righteousness that we feel is sufficient to save ourselves. We understand that when we grasp the law that clearly, in the end it will do what it is supposed to do and that is not provide a way for us to save ourselves but a way for us to be honest with ourselves. The law, if we are honest, will condemn us. It will hold a mirror to us and say, *“Now wait a minute. The person I pointed at isn’t any further away than the person to whom the finger that I pointed is attached. The person I’ve pointed at is in fact in the mirror.”*

This guy, this administrator, this crook realizes that he is going to be left without a friend in the world so he tries to create friends for himself by making his boss look a little bit friendlier. Now it’s a bit cockeyed perhaps but I think that may be where I moved to in my theologies when I started to realize that the law wasn’t a very good place for me to hang my hat of righteousness and that I as a sinner accepted from God at some point, as we all grow into that, what it is we need to continue our lives significantly and joyfully and in relationship not only to God, but with others. And so I think as this crooked administrator has started to understand the generosity of his boss, he interprets it for others and says, *“Look, I know this guy. I know him well enough to know that if I share his kindness with you, he won’t take it back.”* And he could do this because he knew what the boss was really like. He had lived and worked with him for years, as we have with God. And I think we start to grow into a better concept of who God is as we grow in our Christianity and we become a little bit braver, possibly even brazen, in our proclamation of God’s goodness, of God’s love, and we’re smart enough, assured enough, crooked enough - we’re enough like worms and slugs as this guy was - to know that if we share what it is we receive that is good news, it will create for us relationships with others that are productive and useful and important to our lives.

I think buried at the bottom of this contorted and challenging gospel is this reality: an acknowledgment that God can only be understood in terms of human relationships and connectedness. This is a gospel about a God who chooses to live in this world in flesh and blood, a God who chooses to be known by hands and hearts and eyes and ears and tongues and noses and lips and feet in every relationship we have with every other human being we encounter in our lives, that the potentiality to encounter God is entirely possible in every human relationship and all human connectedness, that God cannot be known in any other way except through the beating of a human heart. The mistake that the crooked administrator made was to think that his boss’s importance was in terms of his pocketbook, and the real loss is not of the money or access to it, but the loss of that relationship. The thing that is shrewd and wise and wonderful about the crook is that he knows that without human relationships he is purely, entirely, thoroughly sunk.

And so in there is buried this truth of our relationship to God and our relationship to each other - that, in fact, we cannot know God without knowing each other. I know there are people who enjoy and make time for and go into empty churches to meditate. It never floats my boat because I can do whatever it is I would do in a church in bed when I get up in the morning, in the chair after I turn off the TV and sit by myself quietly. But what makes this building useful to me personally, religiously is when you are in it. And then I am welcomed as you do as Christian people to experience and share in the wealth of our relatedness to each other, and that is where I encounter God’s smile, God’s ear, God’s hands, God’s heart, God’s love, God’s presence, God’s joy. And that’s not because we all agree. It *is* because we are all here, and we make the confession that God is present with us because there is something about this gathering which is larger than the sum of its parts. All of the parts are different, all of the parts are sinful, all of the parts are forgiven, and when all of the parts are put together in some extraordinary, palpable, real way God is present with us.

That's why when we gather we celebrate what's called the sacrament. We listen to God's Word and try to understand it even when it's confusing, and we say along with St. John at the beginning of his gospel that "*the Word becomes flesh and lives among us.*" And so we feel something here. It's not measurable with scientific devices, but it's also very real. And then we affirm that by taking a sip of wine and a bite of bread. We gather here to share a cultic meal in which we confess that just as on the road to Emmaus after Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial and resurrection, he was recognized as present when they broke bread and ate together. We don't gather much without breaking bread because somehow in the sharing of a meal God's presence is real. That's what we claim to be the wealth of the Almighty, and it has nothing to do with gold, it has nothing to do with silver, it has nothing to do with bank accounts. It has everything to do with people and our connectedness and relatedness to them. That is where the encounter with God occurs.

Now there is a high falutin church word for this. It's called *incarnation* which simply means the enfleshment of God. That's a word that we trot out at Christmas time, and we refer to the birth of Jesus as the incarnation of God. Well, it's a place to start but I hope you don't stop there because if your sense of the incarnation has something to do with a Jewish kid who was born two thousand years ago and has nothing to do with your body today, I think we're missing the point. Incarnation is our belief that God is possibly, really and only present with us in our relationships with each other and all people in the world. And frankly, friends, that means with people who will vote differently than I do. And that's where the church becomes important. This is where the church becomes important: when all the people on the other half of the world who have no sense of who Jesus is to us are seen by us as potentialities, people with whom to have a relationship in which we can encounter God. The church is an amazing miracle of the reality that God's presence has something to do with being greater than the sum of the parts who come to experience that presence and that means you and it means me.

If the gospel today is about anything, it is about a crooked, lazy worm of a man who knows that without a relationship with somebody his life will be worse and who works to ensure that he can be connected and believes that in those connections he will encounter God and his life will be better. I don't know about you, but the connectedness I experience here is divine and makes my life better, and I'm certain it does the same for you.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.