Sermon | Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost | September 18, 2022
Barnabas Pusnur | Luke 16:1-13

Yesterday was a beautiful day for the church of God and for the diocese of Chicago. Yesterday, was the ordination and consecration of Bishop Paula Clark. After a long interval in this diocese, we now have a bishop, a chief pastor, someone who will oversee the church and lead us as we work for the good news of the love of Jesus Christ.

Quite a few of us who worship here at SPR are not cradle Episcopalians. Last Sunday, during adult formation, Roger Ferlo asked for a show of hands for those who did not grow up as Episcopalians. Many of those present, and I'd say a majority present there, raised their hands. There are different reasons why we've all ended up here. Different stories of how this church became home to us.

While our church time & friendships are most immediately and visibly tied to this local church- St. Paul & the Redeemer, the fact is that we are a part of something that goes beyond the walls of SPR. We are part of a geographical cluster of churches in northern and west central Illinois- which forms the diocese of Chicago. The leader of this diocese is the Bishop Paula Clark. The Greek origin of the word 'episcopal' means overseer. We are called Episcopal because of the church structure of oversight that a bishop provides. We are part of something that is bigger than SPR. This diocese has 31,000 baptized members. It may often be hard to see this relationship, but we are connected.

We live in a world that is deeply interconnected. This is true not only of the church, but every other dimension of our lives, especially the economy. Our personal finances are connected to the global economy. Events and actions that happen far off in another part of the world impact us. We are all part of a large, interconnected web. And one of the effects of this deep interconnectedness is that if the web has unjust aspects to it, we are unavoidably part of that injustice. We are aware that many of the products we buy and use are made in unsafe and deplorable conditions. We are aware of the history of oppression and exploitation that built this economic system. Yet, we are inextricably part of this connected economic system.

Jesus told a parable of a manager who was dishonest with his rich master's wealth. He was squandering it off, most likely for his personal gain. When his master comes to know of it, he calls the manager and tells him to give him an account of the money, and to be ready to be fired.

This parable is in the Gospel according to Luke. Now, whenever I read Luke, I remind myself that Luke is writing with a heavy bias against the rich and in favor of the poor. Luke's gospel is often called the gospel of the poor- and I believe many of his original audiences may have been the oppressed and the poor of the society. As I try to read the parable from the perspective of someone who is marginalized and poor, even before I think about the dishonesty of the manager, I am immediately biased against the rich man. For Luke, the rich man always plays the negative role. For the reader, the dishonesty of the manager is overshadowed by the dishonest wealth of the rich man.

And what the manager does with the dishonest wealth when he is caught is what is commended in this parable. The manager is forward thinking. He knows his life managing this dishonest wealth is about to be over and soon he may be left without any resources for sustenance. He may even have to beg. He now needs to think about the future. And this is where he acts shrewdly. He wants to have a place to go when he is fired. A place to live. So, he secures his future by cancelling the debts of his master's debtors. He calls one with a debt of 100 jugs of oil and cancels it to 50. He calls another with a debt of 100 containers of wheat and makes it 80. He dishonestly but shrewdly gives away the dishonest wealth of his master, so that these debtors would be grateful to him and welcome him home.

To many of us readers the dishonesty of the manager is very problematic. How can the parable commend such actions? This is a hard parable to interpret. But as I keep imagining the first hearers of the gospel, those poor people who were oppressed, I can imagine them chuckling at how the manager tricked the rich man. There might have been a burst of laughter at his trickery and even an applause at how the manager managed to pull himself out of a very difficult situation. In more ordinary circumstances, we can be disgusted by the manager's actions, but when the poor were going hungry, they must have seen his actions as a justified misfortune for the rich man.

Not only would the debtors whose debts got cancelled have been happy with the shrewdness and forward thinking of this manager, the parable ironically says even his master appreciated his cleverness.

We are all entrenched in an economic system that has unjust dimensions. Like the manager who knew that his time of using his master's money was up, we know that one day all our time in this world and our time using its resources will be up. I imagine as long as we are alive, we are the managers of dishonest wealth in the world. Now like the manager, one day our time of managing this wealth will be up- all of us will die.

Luke in his gospel gives hope to the poor who die. Luke's theology about post-death, is a theology of reversal of circumstances and resources. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." Now again, in ordinary circumstances this reversal may seem too simplistic and not reflect any high thinking. But to the broken poor it was good news that must have given them hope.

In this parable Jesus talks of a reversal. While in this earthly life the poor need to befriend the rich in order to survive, Jesus reverses that and says it the rich who need the poor for afterlife. Jesus turns to the rich and says make friends with your dishonest wealth.

The manager plans for security after he would lose his job. Jesus exhorts us to think about our time after death. While the ethics of the manager may seem questionable and manipulative, I believe we have an opportunity to reflect how we would use our economic resources, even though it may be part of an unjust system, in a way that when our time is up, we are left with things that are of value and are lasting beyond this earthly life. We have a choice of what we do with our wealth from a dishonest system. We can use everything we have to secure things for our lives on earth. But the things of the earth pass away. They do not endure. Today's opening collect read "Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure." While our houses, cars, and other material things will pass away, I believe our generosity and care for others, the joy of relationships, the legacy of love that we leave behind, and our communion & fellowship with those in need, these are things that will endure.

And not only as individuals, I think even as a church we need God's wisdom to know how to use our resources for things that will endure. We are called to be a balm to people hurting in our church, in our neighborhood, in our diocese, and in our world. We need's God's grace & strength to know how to fulfill that calling.

In yesterday's ordination and consecration liturgy, Bishop Paul Clark chose the gospel reading from the Gospel according to Luke. I will end with this passage from that reading talking about the mission of Jesus and I believe ours too:

"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor."

Amen!