

The Parable of the Conniving Fool

Luke 16:1-13

TUMC, June 16, 2024

Our parable this morning, one of the most difficult parables of Jesus, raises several questions, but my questions are:

What do we do with it?

How does it change how we understand ourselves,
and the societies in which we live?

How does it influence our theology or shape our faith?

Let's bear those questions in mind as we explore a parable about an asset manager whose boss is threatening to fire him for mismanaging the accounts.

The threat of becoming unemployed caused the manager to assess his employment options, and he concluded that his future was bleak. He was too weak to dig and too proud to beg.

Then he got an idea. If he reduced the balances of the accounts, the debtors would welcome him into their guest rooms.

So, he went to the debtors and reduced a debt of 900 gallons of olive oil to 450 gallons and he cut a balance of 1,000 bushels of wheat to 800.

When he told his boss what he did, the boss commended him for being shrewd and, presumably, reinstated his employment.

But Jesus did not think the manager was shrewd at all. He said:

“The people of this world are more shrewd than the people of the light, presumably the people in his audience.

Then Jesus seemed to have used a little sarcasm to say:

Use worldly wealth to gain friends, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

Then Jesus got more serious, and added:

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?

As the pharisees were leaving, they sneering at Jesus, and Jesus said:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

How do we interpret this parable?

Its most popular interpretation assumes that the manager reduced the debts, and he went to live with the debtors, but this interpretation has a few problems.

First, it assumes that highly indebted poor people have guest rooms. If they had houses with guest rooms, they wouldn't be poor.

Second, this interpretation fails to recognize that embezzlement is a crime. If you embezzle funds, you might occupy a guest room with bars and guards.

Finally, this interpretation ignores that Jesus was probably mocking the manager by putting the words of his boss into the manager's mouth:

If you don't collect more money,
you will be living with the debtors.

Another interpretation of the parable suggests that the manager saved his job by paying his own money after he reduced the debts to reduce the debts, benefitting his boss and the debtors as his own expense. However, if he had the money to do that, he would not need a job.

We need a third interpretation, one that considers the economic context of the parable, such as why the debts are measured in commodities, rather than money.

There are two reasons. First, the ancient Jewish law forbade lenders from charging interest on loans. Second, in inflation in ancient cultures, especially those that were occupied by a major empire, was rampant.

Lender went around the interest prohibition and protected themselves from inflation, lenders measuring the debt in terms of commodities. If inflation was 100 percent annually, which was common, the balances of the loans doubled, and then an administrative caused the debts to rise faster than the debtors could pay them.

The debtors inevitably defaulted on payments, reducing the cash flows of the manger and his boss. If the boss wanted to continue selling commodities and grinding the debtors into more cycles of debt, he had to fire the present manager, and hire a new manager who could generate new debts and renew cash flows.

But this manager was conniving. He knew that he and his boss cared about cash flows, not loan balances, and he realized that he could maintain his cash flows by reducing the loans balances, giving the debtors the illusion that they had less debt. The debtors did not realize that they, like other impoverished people lose when they appear to win.

The manager did not give them anything. The cash flows continued, and the balances escalated back to where they were before the debtors realized what happened.

Luke implied that the manager was flirting with idolatry, serving money instead of God.

That is the point of the parable, but I want to explore another dimension of it.

I would like to package the parable in terms of structural sin, or sinful social structures, terms that get more traction in Roman Catholic theology than in Protestant to Anabaptist theologies, but I think the time has come for Protestants and Anabaptists to embrace these terms, especially because this parable, like most expressions of Christian theology, makes social statements.

I'll define social structures, whether political, economic, social or otherwise, regulate our lives by governing our behaviors; legitimatizing our values and shape our characters. We could not live in relationship with each other without them. They govern just about every detail of how we relate to each other.

To say they become sinful is not to say they become hopelessly evil; it is to recognize that they get corrupted, and become unable to serve people, to varying extends, as effectively as they should. While they cause the lives of some people to flourish,

they fail to serve other people effectively, often putting them in debilitating conditions.

Christian theology offers the hope that our social structures will be rehabilitated, restored or redeemed. John 3:17 emphasize that Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it, and I believe that God, as Creator, Savior and Redeemer, has called the church to the ministry of transforming social structures that have become sinful. We could interpret Jesus clearing the temple as an expression of that effort.

When I was looking for a way to communicate, in a few sentences, how social structures become sinful, I decided that I could not avoid referring to an American political leader who is an icon of sinful, social structures.

The behaviors that cause social structures to become sinful can be categorized as the abuses of power, sex and money, and this person has turned these abuses into the routines of life.

At one time, when the media exposed his abuses of power, his sexual assaults and his fraudulent financial practices, many people thought his political career was over, but they seem to increase his popularity. After being impeached for the abuses of power, and convicted of sexual assaults and financial fraud, he has the support of a major political party to become the next president of the U.S. and he continues to have the support of a major segment of the church.

His influence is embedded into the social structures of our society, and it is sinful. It legitimizes such social maladies as homophobia, xenophobia, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, misogyny, high rates of incarceration, particularly of people who black, brown and socially marginalized, gun violence and negative images of religious minorities. Its economic expressions, which have reduced financial assistance to the most vulnerable in our society, have perpetuated homelessness and hunger, poor stewardship of the environment, and illnesses and deaths of despair, including suicides or deaths from drug and alcohol abuse.

As we review some of these toxic consequences of sinful social structures, our hope is in our passage in Isaiah, a vision of transformed social structures.

The capstone of the vision is an image of wolves and sheep eating together, but I am more concerned with the foundation of the vision. It includes four expressions of hope.

No more infant deaths

No more homeless

No more hunger

And people will live long lives, presumably long healthy and productive lives.

We are all aware that homeless and hunger are becoming moral crises, and many senior citizens live with the fear that poverty will kill them after they exhaust their financial assets.

Of the four, infant mortality catches my attention. I was shocked to learn that, of the 190 countries in the world, the U.S. ranks 55 in infant mortality and Canada ranks 43. The risks of infants dying during their first year of life in the U.S. is about 3 times higher than they are in countries like Norway, Iceland and Switzerland. Canada's rate of infant mortality is about 2 and ½ times higher than the rates in these countries.

The Maternal mortality rate, the rate of women dying in during pregnancy or childbirth, often accompanies infant mortality. Among other countries of the world, the U.S. ranks 65; Canada ranks 45. The risk of a woman during pregnancy is 12 times higher in the US than it is in Norway, and the risk in Canada is about 6 times higher than it is in other wealthy countries.

If sinful is the severest expression of social condemnation, short of a profane condemnation, I will say these statistics are sinful.

Consider what these statistics say about our regard for the most vulnerable people in our society.

Imagine a woman who is poor and pregnant. She is sitting outside of a grocery store; her clothes are tattered; her hair is matted, and she looks aged. She is holding a bowl, hoping people will put money in it.

Consider two questions:

How do our social structures influence your views of her.

How does our parable influence your views of her?

When I see her, I become passionate about the sinfulness of our social structures. Our problem is not ability; it is desire. We have a military budget of \$2.3 billion a day, but we refuse to provide adequate healthcare, nutrition, housing or other vital services to the most vulnerable people in our society. I have heard many political debates about cutting aid to the poor, but I have never heard a political leader say we are ashamed of our rates of maternal and infant mortality.

When I imagined how our social structures influence me to view this woman, I gave \$10.00, but I did not give money to a beggar. I paid her a consulting fee. She served as my visual aid as I pondered the meaning of the verse in our parable:

If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly
wealth, who will trust you with true riches?

Imagining her life helped me understand the difference between worldly wealth and true riches.

The only way I can explain that difference is to embellish the story of St. Lawrence. It took place when an official of the Roman Empire went to St. Lawrence to confiscate the riches of the church.

After he made his demand, St. Lawrence said, “I will gather them and present them to you in three days.”

Then St. Lawrence gathered every piece of gold and silver in the church and sold them. Then he purchased enough food for a huge banquet.

On the third day, he gathered. into the church, the people in the community who suffered from the maladies of its sinful social structures; they included people who were poor, diseased, handicapped, or marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, occupations, family history, etc. After they all gathered, they enjoyed a grand feast.

When the Roman official arrived to deliver the riches of the church to the emperor, St. Lawrence brought him to the feast. The official saw the people who he was socialized to consider as the dreg of the society.

Then he asked St. Lawrence: Where are the riches of the church?

And St. Lawrence said, extending his arms toward the people, said:

Here they are.
Take them to the Emperor.