

## Sermon notes for Proper 20

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Jeremiah 8:18-9:1](#) / [Psalm 79:1-9](#) / [1 Timothy 2:1-7](#) / [Luke 16:1-13](#)

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

### Contemplating a Subversive Jesus with Confessions of a Busy Priest

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Maybe it's more naïve than wise, but I'm going to tip my hand a bit more than usual today. Our Stewardship Team met this morning between services to talk about our upcoming pledge campaign. Yes, you are now forewarned. That means we are going to be talking about money starting in a few weeks, hopefully with a good deal of honesty! But that also means we're going to be challenged to talk about everything else honestly, too.

In my previous call as Vicar of a small, struggling urban congregation, it was a businessman with a degree in economics who best defined money one evening, when we were seated in leadership council plotting our little mission's pledge campaign. In a nutshell: money, he said, is a measure of our worth and our labor as human beings. Sounds at first like a died-in-the-wool capitalist's rallying cry, but it's more than just that. Jesus' world in the first century couldn't have been farther away from American twenty-first century free-market enterprise – yet our Savior recognized money and possessions very much the same way: a measure of our worth and our labor as human beings. So of all things, Jesus spends most of his time talking about money, about economics. He spends more time on this, in fact, than he spends talking about the things that we like to argue about in the church: like sex, or marriage, or doctrine, or religious behavior. Economics matter most to Jesus, because they define and often embody how we value ourselves and others. And so when we get honest about money, the truth is we start to get honest about everything else.

Now if that sounds for a moment like we're selling out to the wider culture, dominated as it is with economic talk, you could be right. Aren't we Christians supposed to be better than everybody else, better than all the talk of money in the world around us? When we launch our pledge campaign this fall, it's going to look, feel, and smell very much like Kiddo, or KQED, or the hundreds of other non-profit fundraising campaigns you all know and sometimes quietly grumble about. We'll break out the budget, talk fundraising goals, invite you to give. But will this be different than what we know already in the world?

Jesus' parable today is a story you all know well, too. It's about business, customer relations, and self-serving enterprise. It's also about corruption, a manager who neglects, forges, embezzles and cheats– the guy we like to point our fingers at and blame for our current economic woes. Jesus paints him up as a bit of a hero. What? Come again, Jesus? Why aren't you here, justifying our righteous indignation at the dishonest managers who, with their bungling our debt, recently flushed billions of household worth down the economic drain? Why

aren't you joining in our Tea Parties or commiserating with our liberal intellectuals about the corrupt politicians who let the crooks get away with squandering our property and careers?

News flash: If you find today's parable puzzling, then you're on the right track. If you think Jesus is messing with your mind, then you're probably right. Stick with it.

In recent weeks, I've been reading *The Contemplative Pastor* by Eugene Peterson. But it might as well be entitled *The Contemplative Christian*, because it's a book for all of us struggling with our faith in the real world. His opening chapter is entitled "The Unbusy Pastor." It took me two weeks just to get through those eight pages!

Like so many of you, I've spent a good deal of my life trying to justify myself by keeping busy. Isn't that what we all do? When the boss is in the office, we are sure to have our heads down, hard at work? And even if that boss is the taskmaster in our own head (because some of us prefer to be our own bosses) we are still driven constantly towards busy-ness out of a sense of needing to justify our existence to ourselves. . . if to no one else?

When the dishonest manager gets busy in today's parable, he's a reflection of our own busy-ness. He might still get hung out to dry, but at least it won't be for idle laziness. He's commended by the master for his vanity, his hard work to build for himself a safety net, a community to catch him when he loses his job and falls from power. He's working on his golden parachute. My busy-ness is often like that. The thinking should be familiar to all of you. At some level, I tell myself, if the ecclesiastical business of the parish goes to hell in a hand basket, at least it won't be *my* fault. At least it won't be because I didn't *work hard enough*. When I'm busy being busy, I'm a dishonest manager, craving my own reputation, and not God's. The truth is, I'm hard at work employing cheap grace to trim your spiritual accounts so you'll like me, so God will reward me in the after-life, so I'll have "treasure in heaven" that – upon reflection – looks suspiciously like treasure here on Earth.

So I used to pat myself on the back when a parishioner would preface a phone call with, "I know you're busy, but. . ." It made me feel important – maybe even a little bit worthy of this office titled "Rector," however meaningless it may be to most people outside these walls. But now, when a member of our community says "I know you're busy. . ." I worry. Being busy makes me a lot less accessible to all of you and to God's call in Christ when it comes. Time to get with the Gospel program. Time to get *unbusy*.

So finally I moved on to the next chapter in Peterson's book, "The Subversive Pastor," and here's where I think we get to the heart of Jesus' parable to us today. He writes, "Jesus was a master at subversion. Until the very end, everyone, including his disciples, called him Rabbi. Rabbis [like parish priests, I might add] were important, but they didn't make anything happen. On the occasions when suspicions were aroused that there might be more to him than that title accounted for, Jesus tried to keep it quiet – 'Tell no one.'

"Jesus' favorite speech form, the parable, was subversive. Parables sound absolutely ordinary: casual stories about soil and seeds, meals and coins and sheep, bandits and victims, farmers and merchants. And they are wholly secular: of his forty or so parables recorded in the Gospels, only one has its setting in church, and only a couple mention the name God. As people heard Jesus tell these stories, they saw at once that they weren't about God, so there was nothing in them threatening their own sovereignty. They relaxed their defenses. They walked away perplexed, wondering what they meant, the stories lodged in their imagination. And then, like a

time bomb, they would explode in their unprotected hearts. . .He *was* talking about God; they had been invaded!

“Jesus continually threw odd stories down alongside ordinary lives (*para*, ‘alongside’; *bole*, ‘thrown’) and walked away without explanation or altar call. Then listeners started seeing connections: God connections, life connections, eternity connections.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, if truth be told, most of us come to Church most of the time to be comforted. . .to be told that we’ve been good boys and girls this week and then receive our reward. Or, if we’ve been bad boys and girls, we come to confess that and be told we’re still loved. Either way, worship is about one thing to most of us most of the time: comfort. Few, if any of us come to Church to hear the Gospel and be *subverted*. This is what I mean about risking naiveté today. I’m telling you like I’m a fool: you’re being *subverted* by today’s Gospel. This subversion means God is getting in through the mundane and ordinary aspects of your lives. God is invading your comfort zone. The moment you’re finding comfort in the words of Jesus, your world is about to be turned upside down. So watch out.

So, good Christians, good girls and boys having worked hard all week, do you think you’re wealth is gained honestly? Think again. When I reflect on the wide socio-economic range of our parish, it doesn’t matter whether we’re earning six-figure salaries with money in the bank or living paycheck to paycheck with bills gnawing at our heels. We all have to wrestle with dishonest wealth. The Greek word in today’s Gospel for dishonest is *adikia*, and it is also translated in Scripture as “unjust” or “unrighteous.”

Consider for a moment the discounted prices you and I and all of us together enjoy – the cheap goods, the inexpensive vacations. Someone, somewhere has worked hard for substandard wages and bare subsistence so we can tuck away a little bit more in our savings or pinch a penny or two. And that’s only the barest taste of an uncomfortable truth – all of our money, from the richest to the poorest among us – is tainted with injustice, with unrighteousness. It is as true for us as it was true for Jesus’ disciples, and true for the audience hearing Luke’s Gospel for the first time in the latter part of the first century. Our wealth is imperfect and *adikia*, dishonest and unjust. From the suffering and struggles that enable our economic prosperity to our own wrestling with the spiritual sins of pride, envy, and greed when it comes to money, our gains are ill-gotten in small and large ways. That’s the bad news.

The Good News is that Jesus knows this about us, and recognizes we still have to deal with our money anyway. He teaches we still have to endeavor to be honest with what we have *anyway*. Be honest in the little things, he says. Show some integrity even with the dishonest wealth. Be shrewd like the dishonest manager is shrewd, and give and share our wealth in the ways that build community, that re-build trust in a world of broken relationships.

In the process, though, allow yourself to be subverted. The underlying message of our coming together to pray, of our breaking bread and calling it “God with us,” is a subversive one. To paraphrase Eugene Peterson, it undermines the kingdom of self and helps establish the kingdom of God. And it does so without guns or

---

<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson. *The Contemplative Pastor*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989. Pp 32-33

placards, votes or political slogans. It does it by taking all that we are and offering it back to our Maker. Even our dishonest wealth is on the table. . .

. . . Because our dishonest wealth may be the measure of our worth to the world; but the measure of our worth to God is in the broken bread and the common cup, the self-offering of a Life freely given, embracing the poverty of death so that we might rise again in the abundant riches of God's infinite love for us.

When we give to Kiddo or KQED, there's an assumed *quid pro quo*. We get quality education for our children or solid reporting on today's events. When we give of our dishonest wealth to the life of this Christian community and to those who are attending to the poor and the marginalized, the least among us, we often expect some heavenly reward. Maybe like the dishonest manager we are creating for ourselves a bit of a safety net. We expect to be commended for our shrewdness. Isn't that true of you? It's true of me. Jesus is telling us today in this parable with every ounce of divine irony: Go ahead. The *quid pro quo* thinking about our salvation is part of our being human. God in Christ knows that.

But watch out. Because the deeper truth is this: That by giving we find ourselves falling into the loving subversion of God's grace. By putting God first, even before our dishonest wealth whenever we can, we are in danger of subverting the *quid pro quo* driven culture of self-service and starting down the path of a life of service to others and to our loving God.

We are in danger of becoming subversives for the sake of nothing other than God's kingdom.