

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)
St. Luke 16:1-15

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

To better understand this text, it might be helpful to understand its place in the grander scheme of St. Luke's Gospel. This is the beginning of chapter 16, which naturally follows chapter 15. Chapter 15 is known, of course, for the three parables it contains: Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and the so-called Prodigal Son. Jesus told these parables to the Pharisees to demonstrate the love of God and all of heaven for the lost, because the Pharisees scoffed at Jesus for receiving and eating with sinners and tax collectors.

The parable of the Prodigal Son presented Jesus with an opportunity to shift His focus. In that parable, as you know, Jesus told of a young man who essentially told his father to drop dead—he demanded his share of the inheritance, then ran off to a distant country and squandered it in wild living. The older son, faithful to the father, remained home and tended to what was left, and all of that was going to be his upon his father's death. Conditions had grown bad where the younger son was, and he was left with nothing. Hopeless, he concocted a plan to return home to be a servant in his father's house; when he got home, however, he was never able to follow through with the entire plan. His father ran out to him on the road, called out for a robe, sandals, and the family ring to be placed on his son, and called for a fattened calf to be prepared for a feast—his lost son had returned to him, and he was going to have a party, for "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Something was missing, though. The older son refused to join the party. Like the first time, the father ran out to him and urged him to join the festivities—his brother had returned! And that's how the parables ended. Jesus didn't say whether or not the older brother joined, probably because he wanted the Pharisees—the older brothers—to realize that they, too, could rejoice over repentant sinners and join them in the party to come.

From there, Jesus turned his attention to the disciples, and that's where today's text picks up. The Pharisees might have still been around. They would have been listening to what Jesus was telling His disciples if they weren't fuming over or pondering what He had just told them. In turning His attention to the disciples, He shifted the focus from the coins or sheep or sons in the previous parables, to figures of the shepherd, the woman, and (most especially) the father. So, he told them the parable of the Unrighteous Steward, who is called a manager in this translation.

As is usually the case when the parables of Jesus are read, the natural inclination is to find oneself in the parable. "How does this parable relate to me?" is the question. It would make sense, given the previous three parables—in those, as a Christian, you would likely identify with the lost sheep, the lost coin, or the lost son over whom God, the angels, and all of heaven rejoice when they are found. Yes, you have been found in Christ, redeemed by His blood, and so at the time of your Baptism and every time you hear the words of absolution, these all rejoice over you.

So, when it comes to this parable, you likely, in some regard, identify with the unrighteous servant, though you might twinge at the idea of identifying with someone who remains being called unrighteous. You have been washed, cleaned, restored, renewed, forgiven, saved—you are declared righteous for the sake of Christ. How is it that Jesus would use someone called unrighteous to refer to you? Because the focus of this parable isn't you, it isn't the unrighteous servant, it's the master. And by having told this parable, Jesus intended to get you to think more on the shepherd, the woman, and especially the father in the previous three parables.

So, focus on the shepherd, the woman, the father, and the master. What do these four have in common? They are merciful, and they are compelled by their mercy to act with overwhelming mercy toward the lost and unrighteous. The shepherd leaves the rest of his flock to search diligently for the lost sheep. The woman tears apart her house to look for her lost coin. The father runs with mercy to both sons and wants them both in the party. And the master...well, that will take a little more explaining.

So, the manager got word that he was about to be put out of his job—he was unrighteous as he has been mismanaging his master's assets. He ought to die for this; the master was well within his rights to demand the manager's life. Well, as it turns out, the manager realized just how merciful of a master he had, and he counted on the master acting in mercy toward him. The master was merciful—he was put out of the job, but he kept his life. But, there is more to the master's mercy that the manager counted on. So, he went to his master's debtors and reduced their debt. This, of course, would give the debtors a favorable view of the manager, though he would only have been a messenger of the master's mercy in this case, and especially of the master—they would want to continue to do business with the master, which also serves the master's interests, in the long run. The master was impressed with the manager's actions, and praised him.

Therefore, if you want to identify with the unrighteous manager, then see in your God One who is merciful, much more so, like the master. Are you a perfect manager or steward of what your Master has given you? No, you are unrighteous in the things of your Father, and for that you ought to die—that is how the Law of God reads. Nevertheless, God is merciful, and He spares your life for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ. He is more merciful, because He further grants you a place in paradise with Him eternally—as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, you have a place at the party, and as such, rejoice with all of heaven over every sinner who repents, be they your brother in Christ, or one who is becoming your brother in Christ.

And it is for this reason, then, that Jesus transitioned from the parable to instructions on wealth. It flows naturally from the parable, where the unrighteous manager made a prudent use of wealth—not his, though, mind you. So, Jesus said,

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

The manager was able to make friends for himself using wealth. Jesus called wealth unrighteous because it cannot save. That doesn't mean it isn't useful, as it is also a gift from God, but as with all gifts, there is this propensity among mankind to misuse and abuse that which He gives, and money is no different. Jesus said to use it wisely, make friends for yourself using it, that when it fails, you will have people who can return the favor. More than that, make use of it for the sake of the kingdom.

If you're curious how that can look, Jesus said in Luke 12,

Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Luke 12:33-34)

In short, use your money and possessions in service to God and His Christ, in the Kingdom of God on earth. Similar to the father in the previous parable, use what God has given you in service to your neighbor, with the intent that they can hear and believe the Gospel. I said that money cannot save, and that's true, but it can be a means to bring someone to the place where they can be saved, and you just might be the person who uses it to that end, and so, "[M]ake friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." In other words, your wealth won't last, but being with someone in eternity will.

That is the reason that God gives you what you have. You are faithful in this little bit to Him by using it for the purpose for which He has given it. "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in

much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" Hear it again. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? It's a valid question, and it should cause you to question just how faithful you have been in unrighteous wealth. Have you done what God expects of you with what God has given you? The only honest answer would have to be, "No." Sure, sometimes you do, or in part you do, but that also means that sometimes you don't and in part you don't—which means that you don't.

So, since you haven't been faithful with what God has given you, should you expect him to entrust you with true riches?

What are those true riches? They are The Word of God, Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, Holy Communion, Holy Absolution, Life, and Salvation. They are any and all of those other theologically loaded words, if you know what I mean.

If you can't be faithful with the little riches that God gives, why should you expect Him to give you these true riches? And those little riches are also more than just wealth and money, but everything that He gives you. You can recite two lists from Luther's Small Catechism, "He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have," and, "[E]verything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like." Can you say that you've been faithful in each and every one of these gifts—and the like? Again, the only honest answer has to be, "No." Sometimes you do, or in part you do, but that also means that sometimes you don't and in part you don't—which means that you don't.

So, again, I ask, why should you expect God to give you true riches? If you have been listening to the parable, you would know that you should expect God to give you true riches because He is merciful; and more than merciful, He is gracious and faithful to His promises. He has given you the true wealth of faith in Him, trust in His Son and in no one else and nothing else for salvation. Sometimes, like with the manager, your job is demanded of you, or something similar or of similar value, but your life is not; that is to say, your eternal life. That's because your life, eternal life, is won in Christ, whose life was given for yours on the cross.

By way of Baptism, you have been placed in Christ. There at the font, by the pouring of the water with the Word, you have been given faith. This faith takes God captive in His Word, as demonstrated by the Canaanite woman seeking healing for her demon-possessed daughter. (cf. Matthew 15:21-28) This faith holds to His promises, which is no big thing because God is faithful—He keeps His promises. By this faith, you can expect your merciful and gracious God to be merciful and gracious to you.

This is because God delights in showing you grace and mercy. He sent forth His Son—His only-begotten Son—to be man like you, and in being man, God took your place under the Father's wrath, showing you mercy. Now, He sends the Spirit to bring you to faith, and to bring to you grace upon grace, to enable you to love and serve your neighbor, so that they and you can by faith hear and receive these words again and again: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.