

Homily, St. Andrew's (baptism)
Proper 25C, Sept 18, 2016
Luke 16:1-13

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Today we baptize little Jack into the grace and family of God. We planned for Jack's baptism several months ago, long before I checked to see what biblical passages were in the lectionary cycle that we follow. As such, well... you win some, and you lose some... and this is just one of those weeks... a week when a colleague posts to Facebook "those are the readings this Sunday?!? Really?!?" The lectionary can be frustrating, even infuriating at times, but still, we try to stick with it as much as possible, telling ourselves the discipline is good for us! Today's Gospel reading is a great example of a passage that, left to our own devices, our own choices, we would always just leave out of worship.

Our Gospel passage today is one of, if not the, most difficult of Jesus' parables. First a little recap: there's a rich man and his manager. The rich man hears that his manager has been squandering his property, calls him out on it and fires him, or at least threatens to fire him. About to be unemployed, the manager worries about what he will do next... he doesn't see himself in manual labour or as a common beggar, so he decides to ingratiate himself to... let's say "the locals", so they will welcome him when he has lost his job. He decides to make friends by reducing the debts owed to the rich man. To one who owes a hundred jugs of oil, he reduces the debt by half and to one who owes a hundred containers of wheat, he reduces it by 20%. Why the difference? Nobody knows, though it's a topic of much speculation.

And then comes that moment... the moment that comes in every parable when the listeners gasp and shake their head with a look of utter confusion on their face. The story continues: "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly..." Commending dishonesty, maybe even fraud... huh?!? It is, perhaps, cold comfort to remember that parables are meant to confound. They are meant to not make sense... at least not in the world... in our world even less than in Jesus' ancient world. Today it gets no better as the lesson of the story is expanded: "... for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." [What are we to do with it?]

In the history of interpretation, there are two basic streams... the first understands the manager's actions as fraudulent and dishonest; the second understands the manager's actions as just and honest. Until the mid-twentieth century, the most common (hence the most traditional) interpretation was based on the first understanding... that the manager's actions were dishonest and fraudulent but that there is, nevertheless, a positive message about prudence or wisdom. With many other scholars, we can draw a distinction between the fraudulent actions and the underlying wisdom, prudence and foresight. It's not the dishonesty that is praised, but the cleverness.

Another option is to disregard the monetary aspects altogether and stress instead the eternal view. If this parable is about the coming end of the world, then the wisdom, prudence and foresight of the dishonest manager is needed. This interpretation requires that we read just the parable, separating it from the final few interpretive verses. There are more nuanced ideas in this stream... hundreds of years worth, but I want to consider the second major stream that understands the manager's actions in a positive way, as just and honest. How can that be?

This line of interpretation particularly considers the socio-economic circumstances of Jesus' world. In a nutshell, the issue of debt and debt slavery was serious. The situation is reflected, for instance, when the Lord's Prayer is translated: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." In Jesus' time, it was common practice for those who collected debts, like tax collectors, to add a "surcharge", if you will, for their trouble. These middle managers became rich by collecting more than what was owed by poor and struggling people, over and above whatever interest was already adding up. Interest rates alone would often be what we would today describe as 'predatory'... something akin to the "payday loan" industry today, or worse, debts owed to loan sharks who work for the mob.

Notice that the debts mentioned in the parable are in product - olive oil and wheat. Owners could demand payment from their tenants in a variety of ways, including various products or money. Such demands weren't necessarily regulated or fair, to say the least. If you need to take out olive trees from your piece of land to pay rent in wheat, and a few years later olive oil is requested... well, it doesn't take long to be unable to pay and become a debt slave - selling yourself or a child into slavery to make payments. The vagaries of market prices would also matter a great deal if payment had to be made in cash. In a word, it was a brutal system designed to make and keep people poor enough that they could never get out but not quite so poor that they actually die.

If any of those options are at play in our parable today... if the system in which the rich man, the manager and the debtors were existing was itself fraudulent or corrupt... or if the system betrayed the Jewish commands about charging interest, or more generally about justice and care for the poor, then the dishonest manager's actions were a step towards righting a wrong. Far from fraud, they were an act of restitution. Perhaps, so this line of interpretation goes, the manager is abandoning his former dishonesty.

There are many "yah, but's" that we could discuss and debate about every possible interpretation of this infuriating parable. Whether the manager's actions were fraudulent or just, honest or dishonest, there are two points that seem particularly important today. The first is the call to shrewdness... to facing even difficult circumstances like looming unemployment with wisdom and prudence, to planning ahead and to making friends as a means of securing one's future. The friends the dishonest manager sought in his time of challenge were not rich. They were, rather, debtors... those who themselves had struggles and might be more open to helping another, particularly if they receive a little relief for themselves. Rich or poor, Jesus' parable today encourages us to use whatever we have, particularly our material goods, for the purposes of heaven - our eternal home.

In just a few minutes, we will baptize little Jack into the family of God. He is not rich or powerful. He is just a child of God who has barely begun to discover his giftedness and his unique role in our community, let alone the world. He is just a baby, and yet by making friends

with him and his family... by welcoming him into our little branch of the family of God, we take a step in securing our future and the future of the Gospel, just a little bit more. And we take a step in securing his future because when we baptize Jack, we all make a commitment to him and to his family that we will love and support him in his journey of faith. Such a covenant secures all of us, for as we make this commitment to God and to one another, we build up our little corner our God's kingdom here on earth now and into the future.

Finally, like every sacrament, Jack's baptism is an act of grace through which he can grow in the sure knowledge of God's love and forgiveness. Even in this most difficult parable today, God's grace is evident, infuriating though it may be. The debtors receive the grace of debt-forgiveness, which could mean life in some very real ways and the manager receives the grace of forgiveness, even commendation, from his master. Our parable today reminds us that God's grace is not bound by our rules or our expectations or our understanding.

Let us continue to wrestle with the fullness of Jesus' teaching - the beautiful parts and the confounding parts. May we act with shrewdness as we consider our future and may we make ever more friends in our journey towards eternity. May we embrace God's grace, whether we understand it or not, and pass it along as best we can, offering grace of love and forgiveness to all we meet.