

September 21, 2025
Proper 20-C
Season of Creation 3
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Amos 8:4-7

Psalms 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

In the Name of the Triune God:
the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen. Amen.

This morning might be one of those times when we take comfort in the old adage that “God works in mysterious ways.” It’s a saying so well known that we think it’s in the Bible...somewhere. The fact that it comes from the pen of 18th century poet William Cowper makes it no less true.¹ God does, indeed, work in mysterious ways.

We begin with a warning from the prophet Amos to those who trample on the needy and the poor of the land, practicing deceit with false balances, because God will not forget any dishonesty that hurts those who are vulnerable.

One of the blessings of the formation conversations we’re having after church is the often-painful call for us to broaden our vision of precisely who it is who has been trampled by our poor stewardship of the planet, regarding it as ours, rather than a gift from God.

Given the stories we hear from our neighbors in North St. Louis about no help – still – after the tornado; or of property scammers or repairs that have been paid for but never completed, Amos’ words are as relevant in our own day as they were nearly 2800 years ago.

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So, it’s a bit of a shock when we hear a weird and confusing parable, with Jesus praising an estate steward for his dishonest dealings. Generations of Christians have banged their heads against this text. It all seems unfair. What in the world was Jesus thinking? What in the world did he mean? What does it mean for us?

Let’s start with what we know. There are two guys: a rich man and his manager. Word has reached the ears of the rich man that the manager has been playing fast and loose with his property: inflating invoices and pocketing the difference. The rich man calls him on the carpet.

¹ You can find the poem in *The Hymnal 1982* at #677.

The manager sees the writing on the wall, and knowing he's not trained to do anything else, executes some strategies to protect his future. Trying to make the best of a bad situation, he goes to his master's clients and reduces their bills, earning their gratitude.

What happens when the rich man discovers that his manager has cooked the books – again? You and I might start a smear campaign on Instagram or TikTok. But that's not what happens. Jesus tells us that the “master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; and went on to say, “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.”

While trying to avoid the sin of smugness, I do find myself wondering how these words are being preached today in the corridors of power in Washington or in Jefferson City. There's nothing in the Sermon on the Mount like, “Blessed are the shrewd, for they shall make eternal homes by means of dishonest wealth.” Talk about God's mysterious ways! Jesus' words here are confusing.

If this parable confounds you, don't panic – parables are meant to turn conventional wisdom upside down, to leave us scratching our heads. This is especially true in Luke's gospel, where things are constantly topsy-turvy.

Let's take a step back for a moment and put this parable in context. In this section of his gospel, Luke has been telling us about Jesus at a dinner party surrounded by not-the-right-sort of folks. When the Scribes and Pharisees grumble, Jesus doesn't answer their criticisms; instead, he tells a series of parables.

There are the two we heard last week – the lost sheep and the lost coin. They are followed by the Prodigal Son, which we heard back in Lent. Each of these stories ends with a party. Each of these stories involves money, but they are parables about relationships.

The same holds true for today's parable, where the manager transforms a terrible situation into one that benefits him, but not just him. It also benefits the vendors, whose debts are reduced.

Now, wait. This is beginning to sound familiar, isn't it? As our Presbyterian friends pray, *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*. Maybe, just maybe, one of the ways to hear this parable is that it's about forgiveness!

But wait a second. If Jesus wanted to talk about forgiveness, why didn't he just say, “There was this guy who had a lot of people owing him money. Instead of being a jerk about it, he said, OK, you guys don't have to pay, and everyone lived happily ever after.” Why didn't Jesus tell us this simple story?

I think that Jesus didn't tell this simple story because we don't live simple lives. Think of how often things get hopelessly tangled up between you and the people you love. You can't remember how it started, and all you can see is a tangled, weedy mess of a garden.

Jesus knows that our lives tend to be complicated, and that we need a guiding hand to, "lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." (1 Tim 2:2b) To that end, Jesus offered himself as a ransom for all, giving us the gift of forgiveness – openly, freely and without restraint. If we know that forgiveness is ours for the asking, why wouldn't we try to lessen the debt of others in our lives?

Toward the end of John's gospel (20:23) the newly risen Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit onto the disciples and says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The late Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*, reads "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

What are you going to do with them? Our hands, and our hearts, are filled with the unforgiven debts of others and, to get rid of them feels like a daunting prospect, like we'll be thrown off balance. After all, we are not God. We cannot offer one another perfect love. We are always going to have mixed motives and screw things up, even when we're trying to do the right thing.

Since this is a parable, let's flip the story around for a moment. I want you to think of a time when you were forgiven. Maybe it was the loan of a car that turned into a gift. Maybe it was a promissory note that your family decided to tear up. Maybe someone you had hurt reached out a hand in friendship. Can you remember how that felt? The weight lifted from your shoulders? The release of the cold hand of dread that constantly gripped your insides? The sheer relief when someone looked you in the eye and said, "I reduce your debt."

Keeping that feeling in mind, let's flip the story back again. Imagine offering to others what has been given to you. Part of this parable is Jesus telling us to get busy and start reducing debt, to start forgiving. This is not about becoming a doormat, or excusing bad or abusive behavior. It's not even about becoming pals again. It is about freeing yourself, laying down the unforgiven debts of others that fill your hands and heart. It's OK to have mixed motives, or to stumble when you're thrown off balance.

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"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." God moves in mysterious ways. And we are part of that mystery. But how to begin? One way to begin is with prayerful mindfulness when doing everyday things. A Celtic prayer for gardeners says this:

All that I dig with the spade
I do it in God the Three's aid.
Each turning of the soil I make
I do it for the Three in One's sake.²

We can also harvest wisdom from rabbinic writings from Jesus' time. One of my favorites is from Rabbi Tarfon, a rabbi of the generation between the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) and the defeat of the last Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire (135 CE). He wrote. "You are not obliged to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."³ Both of these wisdoms assure and challenge me.

Now is the time for us, and the systems in which we live, to pay attention to the bigger values of the kingdom of God – values which are not based on finances but on love. Not based on numbers but on life. Life and love for each and every person, and for all creation, regardless of what they can produce or deliver or support.

The values of the realm of God are not socialist, capitalist, or anything else we might number as an economic system. The economy of God is relationship. And God wants a relationship with you, and with us, and with all creation, whatever the cost.

Can we then, in love, return that desire for relationship? Can we use all that we've been given toward lessening the debt and relieving the suffering of others; so that we might hold fast to the love that endures, to be bold and dare to mirror God's unfailing care for all creation?

We are called to be mindful of turning the soil of our hearts, day by day, to bury those piles of unforgiven debt, to see how we actually move in creation, of what we think others owe us, to gain a clearer vision of those who have been trampled by false balances and environmental racism, to bring all that we have been given to the task of healing the world, which will flourish like a mustard seed, providing shelter and nurture for all creation, of which God is the Author.

You are not obliged to complete the work,
but neither are you free to desist from it.

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever (*Ephesians 3:20-21*). Amen.

² "Breaking New Land," *The Edge of Glory: Prayers in the Celtic Tradition*, ed. David Adams (Harrisburg, Morehouse, 1985), 29.

³ *Pirkei Avot*, (Ethics of Our Ancestors) 2:16.