

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity
01 August, Anno Domini 2021
St. Luke 16:1-13
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

“Men will praise you when you do well for yourself” writes the psalmist. And our sinful nature craves just that - the praises and recognition of men when we “succeed”. When you have more than you need, when you’ve built up a nice nest egg and can retire comfortably, when you are finally able to buy that vacation home then you are praised and congratulated. You are reminded of how hard you’ve worked and how you deserve the reward. Clearly you are being rewarded for your faithful stewardship. Let’s face it, we love mammon. We love seeing our piles of stuff grow. It’s fun. It feels like success. It must mean that God is pleased with us because we have accumulated so much. Having the things of this life is what it means to be blessed by God, isn’t it?

This is exactly the opposite of what Christ teaches today. That is the exact opposite of the kingdom of God. Today, again, the strange economy of God is on full display. The manager had been given charge over his master’s possessions and he had squandered them by using them to enrich himself rather than anyone else. He believed that that which was entrusted to him was given so that he might have more at the expense of others be it his master or his master’s debtors.

Our trouble with this parable comes when then we see how the manager then tries to save his own skin by ACTUALLY ripping off his boss and he is praised. But we have to be careful to understand what he is praised for. He wasn’t praised because he cheated his master. He was praised because he was prudent or wise. Shrewd bears with it a negative connotation, seeming to inherently suggest cheating. But it is this prudence, this wisdom, that is praised. Why? Because even this unrighteous steward finally came to see the great value in mercy. And this

is, in my opinion, why Jesus actually calls him the unrighteous steward rather than the unjust steward. He was unrighteous because he was unmerciful. Righteousness is mercy. Righteousness is enriching others. Righteousness is forgiving the debts of those who cannot pay.

This is the strange economy of God which the unrighteous steward in all of us just can't come to terms with. We have been convinced that God is the God of equity and fairness and reward. "Don't give unless your return is sure." "If we sin then we have to make restitution." When we incur debt we pay it or suffer the consequences. "Surely that's how God works. It's only fair. Good people prosper and bad people suffer." But, praise be to God, that simply couldn't be more wrong. God wants us to be generous with what belongs to Him. He wants His kingdom given away for nothing. He wants mercy to flow freely to all who seek it, no matter how unworthy they or we deem them to be. He wants debts - be they debts of money or of sin - to be freely forgiven.

That's what makes this parable difficult on its surface - it's not how we operate and so we do all sorts of mental gymnastics to try to make it work, to rationalize it and fit it into the construct of what we deem reasonable. God isn't reasonable. He is merciful. He washes away the sins of tiny babies who have done nothing to earn such an immeasurable gift. He forgives murderers, cheating spouses, and terrorists. He is the Good Shepherd who leaves ninety-nine righteous people in the open fields to spend endless hours and energy and resources searching for one foolish sheep who has wandered off into danger.

God the Father is merciful. He doesn't first count the cost. If He did, we would all be certain of our eternal destruction. Certainly none of us would argue that our sinful, rebellious, selfish lives are worth anything compared to the sinless, obedient, selfless life of God's only Son. This is why we are like the unrighteous manager. We are too busy counting, too busy asking ourselves how much it will cost us, how much we will get in return. "What if I emptied my wallet for the homeless man on the street corner? Will he spend my mercy wisely?" "What if I just forgive and forget? How will my

enemy ever learn his lesson if there are no consequences?” “What if I were to actually tithe to God of my firstfruits? Would I have enough to live on?”

Repent and stop fearing mercy. The Lord Jesus Christ has poured out His precious life-giving Blood for you without first asking how you will spend His forgiveness. He has rescued you from death without ever asking if you would first agree to stop your sinning. He absolves you without forcing you to first prove beyond a shadow of doubt that you are sincere. That is true righteousness. In the waters of the Jordan Jesus told John that His own Baptism was necessary in order to fulfill all righteousness because in those waters the sins of all men were laid on God's spotless Lamb without a cost/benefit analysis. Begun in the Jordan and fulfilled on Golgotha, the true riches of God's kingdom were poured out in a never-ending stream, that flowed just yesterday over the head of our newest sister, Gail. That is exactly how God wants it. Week after week the sacrifice which paid your debt is offered to you so that your troubled soul may find rest, so that you remember Jesus who died for your sins and receive the very life He gave for you. You can't have too much forgiveness. In truth, it is precisely by being forgiven, by being showered with the mercy of God that we learn how to gladly do the same for one another. Jesus wants your sins to be forgiven. He wants you set free. He wants to bear the whole burden and pay the whole cost. And He wants you to do likewise, with the same reckless abandon, to forgive those who sin against you. They may never thank you for it. They may never even ask you for it. But God wants you to give it to them anyway. Just as there is no cost for you to receive mercy, there is no cost for you to give it.

And it is no different with the earthly mammon that your heavenly Father has given to you. What He has given to you, use to bless others - your family, friends, neighbors, and enemies. Don't squander it like the unrighteous steward trying to enrich himself. Unrighteous mammon is mammon that isn't used in mercy to bless and care for others because we are afraid of giving it up, afraid of what we won't be able to have. Be

merciful as your Father in heaven has been merciful to you in full and over-abundant measure. You are free from worrying about the cost because there is none. You are free from worrying about if the other person will waste it. You waste and abuse God's good gifts all the time and still He gives them to you. Forgive your debtors as your heavenly Father has forgiven the eternal debt you owed to Him.

Men won't, but God will praise you when you do well for others, when you trust His mercy and show mercy to others - sharing, forgiving, sacrificing. Those who lay down their lives for others will hear those wonderful words "Well, done, good and faithful servant. Come and inherit the kingdom prepared for you by My Father." Look and behold the mercy which God has lavished upon you. Come and taste of the Lord's mercy which He freely pours out to you this day. Enrich yourself not with the unrighteous mammon of the world, but with the righteous wealth of the kingdom of God.

In the Name of +Jesus.