

September 18, 2022

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 16:1-13 (*The short form is Luke 16:10-13, the italicized section*)

Jesus said to his disciples, "A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property. He summoned him and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward.' The steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes.' He called in his master's debtors one by one. To the first he said, 'How much do you owe my master?' He replied, 'One hundred measures of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.' Then to another he said, 'And you, how much do you owe?' He replied, 'One hundred kors of wheat.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.' And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. "For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. *The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth? If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."*

Background:

The gospel from last week told of sinners and tax collectors drawing near Jesus. But the Pharisees and the scribes complained about Jesus' association with these people. In response, Jesus told the three parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7), the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10), and the lost son, commonly referred to as Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). That well-known parable ends with the father telling his oldest son, "Now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:32)

What follows in Luke's gospel is the parable of the dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-8) which is followed by a string of sayings that seems to interpret the parable (Luke 16:9-13). It may be helpful to know that today's gospel leads into another familiar parable that also focuses on the right use of wealth, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. That parable will be the gospel text for next Sunday, the 26th Sunday in Ordinary time. This Sunday the focus is the parable of this steward and how he uses his master's wealth.

For many, even most, this parable is difficult to understand, because the owner seems to be rewarding the steward for behavior that is contemptible and illegal. Hopefully this will make it more apparent that the parable is coming out of a culture that is very different than our own and therefore is an invitation to grow in appreciation of the culture and the times from which the parable comes.

It might be helpful to point out that in the gospel from last Sunday the eldest son spoke of his brother as the son who had returned after having swallowed up their father's property. Other texts translate "swallowed up" as squandered, the same word used to describe what the steward had done with his master's property that led to his dismissal. This too should help raise some questions and the need to look at this parable anew.

The steward is expected to manage his master's resources in a way that will benefit his master. The text does not say he has cheated his master, only that he squandered his property, and therefore he is being relieved of his responsibilities. He could have been fined and asked to return whatever property the master feels was lost by his mismanagement, or even be taken to court which would have been a much more public and legal transaction.

Before his dismissal becomes public, the steward decides to use the time to his advantage. As steward he has the authority to make agreements for his master. He calls in two men who have agreements with his master for how they are to pay him for the use of his land. In both cases they are to pay a fixed amount in rent. Perhaps partly inspired by his master's generosity and partly inspired by his desperate situation, the steward reduces the payment significantly in both cases. This will create a relationship with each where they are bound in some way to repay the steward after he is dismissed.

At the same time, it also creates a great deal of good will toward his master. Social norms of the day would require the two debtors to make known the generosity of the master. As the story is told and retold, the master's esteem within the community rises. If now the master dismisses his servant and reveals the dishonesty of his servant, his reputation is then negatively impacted. Instead, the master commends his dishonest servant for acting prudently.

How has this steward acted prudently? The rest of Jesus' exhortation sheds some light on the prudent use of wealth. The master in the parable was going to dismiss his servant because he squandered his property. He too is thinking like the elder son who sees property as possessions to be accumulated. Both the steward and the prodigal's father see property as a way to build relationships and to be shared. In this light, the other saying in the gospel enhances this perspective on the right use of wealth and property.

Jesus' values as he teaches those who would be his disciples are meant to be a challenge that is succinctly stated in the last line of the gospel: "You cannot serve God and mammon."

Reflection Questions:

1. When you think about wealth and the wealthy, what kind of images and feelings come to mind?
2. The steward in the gospel was reported for "squandering" his master's wealth. What do you think he was doing?
3. Why do you think his master didn't have him put in prison or demand that he be repaid?
4. In the last week, have you used wealth to build relationships?
5. Have there been times when others might have looked at your actions as squandering the wealth in your possession?

6. What could you learn from the master in this gospel parable? What could you learn from the steward?
7. The steward in this parable says of himself that he is not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg. Are you able to be equally honest with yourself about your limitations?
8. Can you take some time now to talk with God about how you use the wealth at your disposal, your desire to be single-minded, or some of the emotions that rose within you as you reflected on this gospel?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to fr.paul.gallagher.ofm@gmail.com.

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Excerpts from the readings for September 18, 2022, the Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land!

"When will the new moon be over," you ask, "that we may sell our grain, and the sabbath, that we may display the wheat? We will diminish the ephah, add to the shekel, and fix our scales for cheating! We will buy the lowly for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals; even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!" The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Never will I forget a thing they have done!

Praise the Lord who lifts up the poor. Praise, you servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord. Blessed be the name of the Lord both now and forever. High above all nations is the Lord; above the heavens is his glory. Who is like the Lord, our God, who is enthroned on high and looks upon the heavens and the earth below? He raises up the lowly from the dust; from the dunghill he lifts up the poor to seat them with princes, with the princes of his own people.

Beloved: First of all, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity. This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as ransom for all. This was the testimony at the proper time. For this I was appointed preacher and apostle — I am speaking the truth, I am not lying —, teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. It is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument.

Jesus said to his disciples, "A rich man had a steward who was squandering his property. He summoned him and said, 'Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward.' The steward said to himself, 'What shall I do? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do so they may welcome me into their homes.' He called in his master's debtors. To the first he said, 'How much do you owe my master?' He replied, 'One hundred measures of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.' Then to another he said, 'How much do you owe?' He replied, 'One hundred kors of wheat.' The steward said, 'Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.' And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. "For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.

The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth? If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon."

Excerpts from Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113:1-8; 1 Timothy 2:1-8; and Luke 16:1-13