

September 22, 2019
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 20
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 8:19-9:1
Psalm 79:1-9
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

Our lives are filled with transactions. From food to fun, from clothing to cable TV, from housing to cell phones, we purchase things from essential to extravagant. These types of transactions involve money, but that's not the only type of currency. Using a currency of their own devising, the two members of a couple may agree that one cooks and the other washes the dishes. Once we set the pattern of our daily living, we conduct most of our transactions without even really thinking about them.

Whether we're paying attention and regardless of the currency at hand, we expect things of our transactional partners. We expect them to follow the rules. We expect them to play fair. And nothing raises the hairs on our transactional necks like the suspicion that we're being cheated.

This plays out in ways miniscule to monstrous. Consider, for example, the myriad constellation of transactions it takes to run a household. Most of us seek a balance between giving and receiving, and we can get pretty angry when the scale tips too far.

One of the economic transactions that many people find unpleasant is buying a car. That's partly because cars are expensive. But I suspect that the bigger problem is that we have to negotiate with the sales staff. No matter how much or how little that new car ends up costing, we fret that we should have held out for a better deal. We drive away wondering whether the person right behind us paid less than we did for the same car.

This week brought more news about Purdue Pharma and the opioid settlement. Currently, "An estimated 2 million people in the United States have a substance use disorder related to prescription opioid pain medication."¹ The human cost has been immeasurable—and *one* family amassed fantastic wealth. They already had more money than they could possibly need—and yet they did some very wrong things in order to get even more. The truth is, when money is involved, it's so very easy to let slide one's principles. That's why I still buy things on Amazon. As the amount of money involved gets larger, the temptation to bend the rules grows correspondingly.

Issues of wealth figure prominently in today's Gospel. It's a difficult reading, for a number of reasons. For one, it includes a parable followed by a series of sayings. Bible experts point out that the *parable itself* and the *subsequent sayings* were probably not originally linked—that Luke put it all together when he wrote it down. The different sayings might even be early interpretations of the parable—and evidence that even the earliest Christians had trouble making sense of it. I want to put the sayings aside and focus on the body of the parable. This makes our task only a little easier.

With this parable, Jesus, as he often does, surprises us. The central character in this parable—the manager—is not particularly sympathetic. He’s such a poor manager that his master threatens to fire him. Concerned with self-preservation, the manager guarantees his own future security by doing favors for others—and he does these favors using his master’s wealth. By reducing the debt owed to his master, he reduces his master’s profits. Even so—and here’s where the surprise comes in—the master commends the manager, and Jesus seems to concur.

If we’re a bit confused by what this implies, at least we’re not alone in our confusion. I won’t go into all the reasons why, but various commentators have called this parable “one of the most perplexing texts in the canonical apostolic writings,”² the “prince among difficult parables,” and a “notorious puzzle.”³ My New Revised Standard Version of the Bible titles this section, “Parable of the *Dishonest* Manager.” On the other hand, my New International Version calls it, “Parable of the *Shrewd* Manager” (emphasis mine). If the experts don’t agree, what are *we* to make of the manager’s actions? Is he *dishonest* or is he *shrewd*?

As we think about this, let’s remember that we’re working with a parable: the story is not meant to be taken literally. One interpretation of the manager in this parable places him in the tradition of the *trickster*.⁴ The trickster says and does outrageous things, using cunning to get what he wants. The trickster makes fun of those in power, using humor to reveal the truths being exposed. Think of the court jester in the English tradition, Coyote in the Native American tradition, or the figure that came to be known as B’rer Rabbit in the African American tradition.

Sometimes the trickster gives us new ways of seeing the power structures in society, the people who occupy them, and the ways in which they operate. In doing so, the trickster also reveals how power structures affect the power-*less*. Sometimes Jesus himself has been interpreted as a trickster.

The trickster can be fun. The trickster can also be dangerously subversive. As events play out, the trickster is typically loved by some and loathed by others. Jesus-the-Trickster was executed.

Regarding our parable, those experts agree that the master compliments the manager for his clever use of the limited resources available to him. And they agree that, through this parable, we are also called to be clever stewards of our resources, applying them to building the Kingdom of God. That’s plenty for us to chew on, but maybe we can say more.

I think the natural inclination when we hear this parable is to focus on the manager. But remember, the court jester is targeting the guy in charge. In our parable, then, maybe we should be looking more closely at the master, who is described as a rich man. The manager in his desperation has subverted the economic expectations of his time. In this subverted economy, the rich man is still doing just fine, and everyone else is just a little better off. In the end, and to our surprise, it’s the master, the guy who got cheated, the guy who had to pay for it, who affirms this new thing.

Maybe, with the help of our trickster manager, the master has realized that there might be some problems with his previous notions about what makes a transaction “fair.” If so, the parable is not just about the manager’s survival. Instead, it’s about a whole new system of economic justice. And maybe, it’s about even more than that. Once again, Jesus has thrown out the “rules” and even called into question the very idea of “rules.” Maybe it’s about a whole new system of transactional relationship, a whole new way of being, manifested throughout God’s creation.

As I mentioned earlier, commentators agree that today’s Gospel parable calls us to be clever stewards of our resources, applying them to building the Kingdom of God. If that’s the case, maybe it calls us to a new economy, one of economics and beyond, one in which the only standard is *love*. This is pretty daring in a culture that rewards competition rather than compassion, one that leads us to hoard what we have, rather than offering it back as God’s own. Following Jesus, we too are tricksters. We are tricksters any time we defy the usual rules of commerce and instead trade in love.

It’s Pride week in New Haven. The rest of the world observes Pride in June, and so it always feels a bit off to be doing it here in September. That’s especially so this year, which saw the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots in New York City. I long for time when we no longer feel the need to observe Pride, but that day has not yet arrived, not even here in New Haven.

Pride is not unrelated to our topic today. If I have ever met a trickster, she was a drag queen. From early in the history of the LGBTQ+ pride movement, drag queens led the way. In performance, the drag queen is glamorous yet snarky; she evokes both laughter and tears; she adopts the gender norm and then twists it right up to the point of breaking. All this is fun on the surface but very dangerous underneath. Challenging one societal norm necessarily challenges all societal norms.

Those who resisted the movement were right to be frightened. Change has come at a rapid pace. It has brought a still-growing freedom from gender norms that is blessing not just for gay folks. Pride is a time to celebrate how far we have come, and remember how far we have yet to go. Our LGBTQ+ siblings are still all too often being left out of the economy of love.

In the Good News of Jesus Christ, *God is all love*, love abundantly and freely offered. Love is the one thing we need never run out of. In love, together building the Kingdom of God, we are tricksters who have all the capital we need.

Notes

¹ American Psychiatric Association, “Nearly One in Three People Know Someone Addicted to Opioids; More than Half of Millennials believe it is Easy to Get Illegal Opioids,” May 7, 2018, available online at <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/nearly-one-in-three-people-know-someone-addicted-to-opioids-more-than-half-of-millennials-believe-it-is-easy-to-get-illegal-opioids> (accessed September 22, 2019).

² Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy: Refinancing Redemption* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 182.

³ Quoted in Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1–13* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 70; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 1; in Grau, 182.

⁴ R. Allen Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, The Gospel of Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 310.