

Homily for September 22, 2019 (Luke 16:1-13)

The first day in a new place can be hard. I know that when I was in school, or starting a new job, I always hoped that I would be able to ease into things on my first day. Maybe the professor would just review the syllabus, and then let us go, or I could just fill out a few forms for Human Resources while I tried to figure out how to log on to the computer system of my new company. I did not want to face challenges until I got my feet under me. Well, today is the first day on a new job for me. I was ordained as a deacon yesterday, so today is the first day that I am preaching.

A few weeks ago, I decided to take a look at the readings for today, to see what I would be preaching about. I was hoping that it would be something simple and straightforward for my first day in the pulpit. Maybe: “Love your neighbor.” Instead, I realized that today’s Gospel is the story of the dishonest steward. This passage is the definition of a hard first day for a preacher.

Think about this story for a minute. The steward squanders his boss’s money. Then his boss fires him. Then the steward tells his boss’s clients that they don’t owe his boss as much as

they agreed to. His boss then praises him. And then, after all that, Jesus tells us to make friends with dishonest wealth. This is not an easy text. If I had been fired for mismanaging my boss's money, and then cut the amount his clients owed without telling him, I have trouble imagining that my boss would be praising me for that. I think it is more likely that he would be calling the cops at that point.

I was confused. So, being the good Jesuit that I am, I did what Jesuits do when we are confused: I went to the library. I figured that Biblical scholars who know a lot more than I do about these things would be able to shed some light on the story. Unfortunately, what I found was that most of the commentaries describe this story using words like “confusing” or “difficult” or “puzzling.” So that was not much help.

Still, as I looked a little deeper, I realized that there is something to be found in today's Gospel, because we are working our way through the Gospel of Luke this year, and there is a common theme in this part of Luke. We seem to be in the season of squandered wealth with the Gospel readings this month. Last week, we heard the story of the prodigal son, who squandered his father's wealth, but was welcomed back with

open arms when he came to his senses and returned home. Today, we hear about the unjust steward who is fired for squandering his boss's wealth, and then praised for seemingly squandering it some more. Next week, we will hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus, where the rich man squandered his wealth on himself in luxurious living, rather than caring for the poor man at his door. What all three of these stories have in common is that they show us that God's idea of what wealth is for. It is for squandering, not on ourselves, but on others.

There was one useful thing in those Biblical commentaries that I looked at: when the steward cut the amount the clients owed his boss, he may actually just have been reducing his commission on their debts, not reducing what his boss would receive. He was not squandering his boss' wealth but his own by cutting the debts. This tells us something about how Jesus sees the right way to relate to wealth. We can presume that when the steward was mismanaging his boss's money, he was doing it for himself, to increase his wealth, but when he was forgiving the clients' debts, he was letting go of his wealth. Of course, he was trying to protect himself by developing relationships with others, but in the process he was helping those

clients. By letting go of his own wealth, he was simultaneously building up the community around him, by forging relationships with others. At a time when he might have been expected to try to hoard every penny, he actually gave up a portion of what he was entitled to. His boss, and by extension, Jesus, praised him for doing this, because he finally understood what wealth was for: building up the community around him. Unsurprisingly, he benefited himself by doing the right thing.

We have all heard of people who live to eat, and people who eat to live, but there may also be people who make money in order to live, and people who live in order to make money. It is this latter group that Jesus is speaking to when he tells us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon. Now, don't get me wrong: we need money – to put a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs and food on the table; to take care of our families and our health. However, we can sometimes lose sight of the fact that money is not an end in itself. We are not called to pile up money, saving more and more. Once we have provided for our basic needs, we are called to squander that money in service of more important goals, especially love of God and love of neighbor. It was when the steward finally stopped squandering

his boss' money for his own ends, and started squandering it to connect with others, that his boss started praising him.

Similarly, if we have wealth, we do not want to hoard it, but put it to use building connections with others and building up those around us. Wealth is meant to be squandered on others: on the hungry or the thirsty, on the stranger or the imprisoned.

While the Gospel may be in the midst of the season of wealth, our parish is in the midst of the season of creation. The lessons from today's Gospel about wealth apply to how we treat creation. We are not called to accumulate as much of the bounty of nature as possible for ourselves. Rather, the gifts of creation are made available to us so that we can participate in the building up of the kingdom of God. We are meant to share them with others, not just those now living, but with posterity.

Remember, when God gave Adam and Eve dominion over all of creation, God was speaking not just to two individuals, but literally to the entire human race. They were not meant to use up all of creation's resources themselves, but to use what they needed, and pass it on to their children. Just like them, our generation of humanity are stewards of God's creation. We are called not to squander God's gifts on ourselves, but to care for

them, so that they can be handed on to the next generation. We are stewards of creation, called to care for it in our time, and ensure that creation, in all its beauty, is there for the next generation to enjoy, as well.

When our generation passes on, and the next takes our place on earth, we will each be faced with one, final, new first day. We will be asked what we did with the gifts we received in this lifetime. Did we hoard them for ourselves, or squander them on others? When that day comes, we can only hope that God will welcome us into eternal dwellings, commending us for having made friends for ourselves with the gifts we have received in this life.

