

Sunday, September 18 – 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “The children of this age”

Scripture Reading: Luke 16:1-15

(The second reading for Sunday will be 1 Timothy 2:1-7.)

Note: Luke 16 contains one of the most puzzling parables that Jesus told. He seems to offer approval to terrible, unethical behavior. And his explanation is that there is something Christians can learn from the terrible and unethical people around us. Let take a closer look.

1. Luke contains many parables – certainly in contrast to Mark (which has essentially one) and John (which has none). So, in many ways, Luke’s gospel is a gospel filled with teaching. A few miracles are sprinkled through the story as well. But chapter 16, as I mentioned, contains one of the most puzzling of Jesus’ parables. He left the crowds scratching their heads on more than one occasion, but this is one where the response had to be, “What did he say?” Read it again – preferably from another, contemporary translation like the Message (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+16&version=MSG>) and reflect on the story.
2. In some ways, the parable in Luke 16 is a natural continuation of the teaching in Luke 15. If the younger son demonstrated a poor attitude toward money and possessions, then Luke 16:1-13 can be read as Jesus’ attempt to offer a proper attitude. (Even the parable in 16:19-31 continues this theme). As an aside – but an important aside! – there has been a great deal of scholarly debate about where the parable ends. Even in the early years of the church, there were scholars (Cyril of Alexandria, e.g.) who thought that vs. 10-13 were sayings of Jesus that were added on to the parable, perhaps because vs. 1-9 seem so shocking by themselves. If you’re up for the debate, ask yourself if vs. 1-9 make sense by themselves. How do vs. 10-13 change (or add to) the meaning of the story? (This is how Bible interpreters earn a living!)
3. Here is the main question of the parable (the meaning depends on how you answer this): Why does the master praise the manager, even though the master seems to know very well what the manager has done (and sees it as dishonest)? These verse are NOT a warning against the destructive nature of riches (even though that may be true). And the parable certainly does not approve of the manager’s dishonesty. No, the only merit to find in the manager’s behavior is that he used what material possessions he had to ensure his future financial security. A story and a question: I had a colleague in a previous church who received a small inheritance from his parents, but instead of putting it into savings for his retirement, he created a fund at the church called “the Great Commission fund” which added to the church’s mission giving each year. In other words, he gave his inheritance away. As a result, my colleague lived close to the edge of poverty and planned to work long after the usual retirement age because he could not afford to stop. Do you admire his behavior? Do you see reasons to feel uncomfortable with what he did? How would you have acted in a similar situation? (Don’t forget to use biblical teaching to support your argument!)
4. Here’s an interesting textual note: Although most English translations have the word “money” in back to back verses (14 and 15), in the Greek the first instance is “Mammon” (MAMON in Greek) and the second is the relatively rare word (used just three time in the entire New Testament) of PHILARGUROS, which is literally a combination of the word “love” (PHILOS) and the word for “silver” (ARGUROS). This may seem obscure to you, but the Pharisees were well known to be lovers of silver. When Jesus uses the word “mammon,” he suggests that it has a personified force. So taken together, verses 14 and 15 may be saying that while the Pharisees regarded money as a worldly good that they could use for their own advantage, God sees this as a potential idol, as something more akin to the Golden Calf than an innocuous matter of dollars and cents and balance sheets and bank ledgers.

5. Money is a complicated issue. It was then and is now. It has the potential to do great good, as well as great harm. And Jesus seems to realize (through his use of the word “mammon”) that money sometimes has a power over us. Sometimes we are helpless in the face of it. Notice the language we find in vs. 11 – real wealth or true wealth. What do you think this expression means? When you reflect on your own relationship with money (isn't that a funny way to speak of it?), what is your relationship like? How would you describe it? Are you in control of your money, or is it in control of you? When do you feel most vulnerable where money is concerned? Do you buy lottery tickets? Leaving aside the moral questions about gambling, what is it that winning the lottery would do for you? Would winning improve your life? In what ways (long and short term)?