

SERMON, A Work in Progress, Pentecost 15C, 9.21.25, Chris Olson Bingea

Well, here we go again, with a parable Jesus tells about money and honesty and wisdom. Bible Study groups including ours — wrestle with this text having lively conversations and maybe more questions in the end than answers. I DO love a good question like the most empowering, gracious question, “What do YOU think?” And I have to admit, I am not sure there is any clear way of figuring this one out. If you do a web search of this text, you will find all kinds of interpretations as it goes beyond the bottom line of serving God over wealth, relationships over money — and maybe that’s enough.

Yet, several years ago Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber had this to say about the stories Jesus told, she writes, “Parables aren’t too helpful, are they? Here’s what would be helpful: six steps to better discipleship. Or the ten secrets of the kingdom of God found in a word search puzzle. If only Jesus’ teachings were as simplistic as they are often portrayed. If only parables were neatly packaged with a single moral answer. If only these stories were clearer, perhaps packaged as an easy-to-read policy manual or employee handbook—that sort of thing.

She goes on to say....It’s just so much work to try to dissect Jesus’ parables for their meaning. It takes a lot of effort to carefully analyze them for hidden meaning, to crack the code and reach a common conclusion, something with easy-to-read instructions. And at the same time, there is no better way to suck the life out of a parable than to explain it, to decode it, to finalize the meaning of it. That’s not how parables are. They aren’t to be studied and interpreted so much as they are to be experienced. We don’t figure them out; they figure us out.” This is good advice.

So, maybe it really is the experience of wrestling with each other and with a text like this that has the ability to transform us in a moment in time - to create community and great conversation that keeps us engaged with the Bible and each other.

And maybe this story reminds us about the importance of even having conversations about money. No matter how you look at it, the manager seems to have one thing right. **He understands that money, and how it is used, is ultimately relational.** The way money is gained and how it is spent affects life for people and between people. We know who paid for lunch the last time we ate with someone, and we know the neighborhood we live in compared with other neighborhoods. We notice all kinds of things about the disparities of people who have a lot of it and people who don’t.

Another piece of good news in this text **is that money is put into the public conversation of the church by Jesus.** This means that we, as people of faith, can talk about money and how we put it to use in our lives. I mean, aren’t we meant to wrestle with decisions about how to best use our money for the greater good? As dishonest as this manager in our story might have been, he **did** provide grace for those who owed a debt to the rich man.

Or perhaps Jesus is hoping we will see how important it is to be creative in finding ways to be generous to our neighbors working for love and justice with whatever means we can, like Jesus who also had a bold and subversive streak. I mean, we can find many examples of his teachings and actions that involved bending the rules or breaking them altogether especially when it was about speaking truth to power and about loving one’s neighbors without exception.

And finally, again, what if the purpose of this parable and others like it is so we keep talking about what they might mean? And how we can apply what we are thinking about them to **this** moment in time and our own context right here and right now?

Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes for me might just say what we are all thinking about this Bible story. He writes,

"I don't know what this means.
Other than that sometimes Jesus says things I don't get.
Sometimes his wisdom is beyond me.
Oh, I can make up stuff to make it make sense.
Sure, it means "Don't be stupid in dealing with the world."
But... Only maybe.
Don't think you know it all.
Faith doesn't require figuring things out.
Write it in pencil, and keep wondering.
Keep asking. Keep listening.

The cover of the bulletin today demonstrates a very long history of the desire to erase our mistakes. Originally, fresh bread was used to erase graphite from surfaces when writing. Now, it is as simple as using an eraser. I like writing with a pencil because it means for me that life is a work in progress and mistakes happen along the way and we are bound to make mistakes that might need erasing and we are also invited to write and rewrite the story for such a time as this...beyond the affects of political division, moved to keep rethinking the affects of systemic racism and poverty and gender inequality in our country, inspired to fight for this planet and create circles of care to reduce the affects of climate change, and doing all this at the same time that we all are paying attention to our own well being and the well being of family and friends. It's a lot to navigate, isn't it?

And yet, we trust - we trust in a God who loves us and like the words from Psalms today - a God who lifts up those in poverty to sit with royalty because each person — each person — is valuable. It is important to remind ourselves and those around us that we are all deserving of love and respect and we are all called to love each other. So, why not put your hand on your heart and repeat after me..."I am a child of God deserving of love and respect and God calls me to be love in the world."

And the second important statement is like this one. So, again, repeat after me..."YOU are a child of God deserving of love and respect and God calls YOU to be love in the world." These words are Songs of Hope - write it in pencil. Amen.