

Pentecost 15, Year C,
Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh
22nd September, 2019
1 Timothy 2:1-7 NIV / Luke 16:1-13 CEV

We all know the story of Robin Hood.

Whether it's from the multitude of movies, or reading the story,

I'm sure we've all heard of Robin Hood and his merry band of thieves,

who spend their time journeying through the Sherwood Forest,

robbing from the rich and giving to the poor.

Robin is the hero that sets things right

by undoing the injustice of the evil usurper King John,

and his notorious henchman, the Sheriff of Nottingham.

We find ourselves cheering him on in his adventures

and applaud his efforts to ensure people are treated justly.

It's kind of interesting how we can celebrate the results of his well-intended work

in this legendary story from a time long gone by,

yet if we take a moment to think about what the story is really about,

would we still find it so laudable?

In our modern context, this would essentially be someone

who is armed and mugging and robbing people of wealth

that they have legally earned.

Yet those aren't the details we focus on.

As a legend and moral tale, we're drawn into the do-good aspects of the story.

After all, it's not all about Robin fighting

the evil characters of the Sheriff and the King .

Much of the story includes his efforts to seek justice

for the poor peasants and serfs of his time.

These were people who were stuck in the meager circumstances

of an existence of constant struggle to make ends meet.

Kept in place by their obligation to the local noble landowners,

the amount owed to their landlord often amounted

to most of what they produced off of the land they worked,

leaving them forever indebted to their overlord.

Yet from our modern sensibilities, would we find Robin's actions so laudable.

After all, he was, in effect, a serial mugger and robber,

stealing the money and wealth from those who were better off,

and giving it to others to whom it did not belong.

While we may argue that is true justice,

the reality of the matter is

he'd be doing some serious time in today's world, wouldn't he?

Even in the legend we are so familiar with,

the local legal authority, the Sheriff,

is constantly seeking to apprehend him to pay for his crimes. His story is not that different from the manager in our story from Luke today. Like many parables, the surface meaning often is quite different than what we arrive at if we look a little deeper. And this particular parable is probably one of the most troubling and confusing ones in the canon at first read. After all, we have the manager of a wealthy landowner who we are told right off the bat that he's not managing his boss's resources well, wasting his money. Then when he hears he's about to be let go for his poor performance, he works out a fraudulent plan with his boss's debtors to reduce their debts, in order to put himself in better standing with them. And the landowner applauds him for his shrewd actions and Jesus goes on to pretty much imply that such fraudulent behavior is the standard we should follow, kind of. Clear as mud, isn't it? But if we step back and take a look at the bigger picture, it might shed a little light into what we are to make of all of this. Like in our Robin Hood story, these debtors were likely local farmers and merchants who barely got by. The deck was stacked against them, and the norm would be they would find themselves hopelessly indebted to the wealthy landlords who took advantage of the situation to allow them to wrack up more and more debt, often resulting in them being forced to sell or transfer their land or property to the landowner to try to resolve the debt. Which allowed the landowner to acquire even more wealth, and driving the peasant into deeper poverty. We're not told how the manager was wasting his boss's money but what if we were to suppose that it followed a similar line as his desperate attempt to further win the respect of the landowner's debtors. What if he was giving price breaks and cooking the books all along to make the business

arrangement more equitable for those in debt to his master. That might change how we look at this whole story. Even without that supposition, even just looking at his wheeling and dealing at the end gives us something to consider and a new way of thinking about Jesus' conclusions on what is the right and appropriate behavior. If we view this from a lens of what is just with the bigger picture in mind, our conclusions may differ from our initial impressions. We make the assumption that when Jesus talks about "wicked wealth" and "dishonest" behavior, he's referring to the manager's actions. But what if he's referring to the landowner instead? Someone who probably overcharges his clients in order to generate more debt that will likely lead to more wealth and property to him, at the expense of a decent life for those whom he deals with. From that perspective, we have more of a Robin Hood scenario to look at. With that viewpoint in mind, Jesus closing statement about the evils of money make more sense. But we still have the question of what is just in this story? Is it OK to take matters into your own hands, like Robin Hood, like the manager in our parable today? Or is that stealing? The answer isn't so cut and dry. Maybe that's the point Jesus is ultimately making. We can't serve two masters and be faithful to both. Those that seek more and more wealth, which always comes at the expense of others in a world of finite resources, whether directly or indirectly, choose the master they will follow, which is not God. Yet are we to really resort to dishonest practices to rectify the injustice the accumulation of wealth leads to? This story may seem like a remote example, but our world isn't so different. Not much has changed in the millennia since this parable was written down. We too have predatory business people who spend their time seeking more and more wealth. Our

corporate models are all geared to maximize profit and maintain stock value at all cost. Our entire economic system is based on achieving the maximum profit with the least expense. Certainly the mechanisms are more complicated today, but the basic process and result are the same. Some have inherent advantage over others and benefit, while others have disadvantage built in. What is just? Are we called to be Robin Hoods and directly rob from the rich to give to the poor to make society more equitable? We hear a lot about this now that we're entering an election year. Words like "socialism" and "redistribution" become the buzz words for all that is wrong with some parties and candidates. But in reading what Jesus says about wealth, should capitalism and corporate greed be bad words as well? What is just? In the grand scheme of things, trying to solve the problem seems like an impossible task. After all, this is how the world has largely worked for a very long time. Yet it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of God is drawing near, that we are to seek the kingdom in the here and now. In the first segment of a video series we have been using for our adult bible study, the author Phillip Yancey uses an example of how Christianity changed the Scandinavian countries. These lands were the home of the murderous Vikings, known for their repeated looting and pillaging of many of the lands of Europe over many years. Yet as Christianity spread, over the centuries they began to change. Now they are places where they ensure the welfare of all their citizens, even welcoming many of the world's refugees and caring for them. At district conference this weekend, one of the delegates from Sunnyslope made the statement that "with God the impossible is possible." With God, how do we make the unjust, just? How do we make ourselves

into the merry band of God's people, who work at caring for the uncared for, making sure all have a fair shake? Unfortunately, I can't give you a magical answer to that question. But that's where this whole notion of being the body of Christ comes in. Individually we can only do so much, yet we can do so much more together, with the Spirit to guide us. As we go forward together, I hope and pray we can seek what part God has in store for us, and put our faith in the right master. Amen.

In our parable, the manager is in trouble
for not managing his boss's money well.

In fact, he's about to lose his job over it.

In desperation, he urges his boss's debtors to fraudulently alter their bills,
reducing his debt.

On the surface, like in many parables, what we read is often difficult to make sense of,
and this is certainly up there with the most difficult of them.

Here is a man who is, in effect,

cheating someone else out of debt that is rightly owed to them.

And it seems as if Jesus is lauding this behavior.

Yet again, as with most parables, we see something different

if we look at little deeper.

We're not told how the manager was wasting his boss's money.

If we take a look at the larger picture,

a different scenario than what is obvious on the surface may appear.

In that time period in Palestine, under Roman and Greek occupation,

you had an emergence of a privileged class
who had the favor of the foreign occupiers.

They had special benefits and privileges
which allowed them sizable land endowments.

As those occupations continued,

those families used their privilege in business and land acquisition
to keep those not so privileged in crushing debt,
often leading to the debtor
being forced to cede their land and property to the landowners
in order to address their debt,
thereby making the landowner even wealthier and more powerful.

So let's consider for a moment, that maybe the manager

was wasting his boss's money by giving those poor folks a price break.

Instead of gouging them,

perhaps he was actually charging them an equitable price.

So when we read about him attempting to save his own skin

by getting the debtors to fraudulently change records to reduce their debt,
maybe he's more like Robin Hood than we think.

While his motives don't appear to be so noble, one also has to consider,

should he be put in the position he finds himself in

if his actions show more ethics than the landowner he is "cheating?"

Perhaps the landowner sees the errors of his own ways,

and that is why he praises his manager's shrewd self-preserving actions.

There's certainly a lot of "what ifs" in that interpretation,

but it is one worth considering.

But it also raises a lot of questions.

Is Jesus saying it's OK to acquire ill-gained wealth by deceptive means?

Is the Robin Hood motif the one we should be following?

What is just?

Most of us, I think, would find it troubling to think

that we are led to robbery and deception in order to do God's work.

But another question is, should we allow the injustice in the first place?

And what do we do about it?

It's clear by how Jesus closes out the parable

that there is a statement being made about the practices of landowners

like the boss in our story.

If our focus is the greater and greater accumulation of wealth,

then our focus is not on God.

And while this story may seem like a remote historical example,

as is the tale of Robin Hood,

has much changed in the millenia since this parable was told?

We still have an economic system that is based on making the most profit

with the least expense, regardless of the consequences.

We still have people of privilege, and people of disadvantage.

And while on paper, it's a level playing field, that has never been the reality. Those at the top have opportunities that are never afforded to those at the bottom.

The question then becomes, what can we really do about it?

How can we make a difference

in something so big and so established in our history and culture?

In the first session of a video series we've been using in adult Sunday School,

the author Phillip Yancey,

discusses how faith made a change in the Scandinavian countries.

At one time, these countries were the home of the Vikings,

some of the most ruthless, greedy people in history.

Over many years, they pillaged their way through Europe many times.

Yet after the arrival of Christianity in those areas,

things slowly began to change.

It didn't happen overnight, but after centuries of faith,

they are now countries that largely model what is to follow Jesus.

They ensure the health and welfare of all their citizens are cared for,

even welcoming and caring for many of the world's refugees.

It was certainly not a quick or easy process, nor one without a measure of sacrifice.

We may look at that and say that's fine for them, but it's that wouldn't work here.

That would be too big a job and too radical a change.

At our district conference this weekend,

one of the delegates from Sunnyslope in Wenatchee made the statement

“with God, the impossible is possible.”

How do we make the unjust just?

Do we really believe that the impossible is possible?

Jesus speaks of the kind-dom of God drawing near,

the kin-dom that we are to seek in the here and now.

Are we seeking that way of living, or are we bowing out and following the crowd,

the unjust way it's always been?

After all, it is a monumental task to take on for any one of us.

Yet we need to take time to reflect on what is just.

Is it the way the world works now, or the way that Jesus models for us?

So what should we do? How do we make change?

Unfortunately, I don't have the magic answer to that question.

However, we are called the body of Christ for a reason.

We are not in this alone,

nor are we expected to solve the world's problems alone.

Together we are called to seek the Spirit's guidance to lead us

and use all of our strengths to seek to build God's kin-dom in this world.

The question is, are we willing to discern together what work God has for us?

Are we willing to make the impossible possible through God?

I'm sure if you lived in the time of the Vikings

you would think nothing could stop the savage tide of those invasions.

Yet look what happened.

As we journey into another week, let's really think about where our priorities lie.

Which master do we really serve?

And what actions are we willing to take

to seek the work God has in store for our little part of the body of Christ.

I hope and pray we have the faith and fortitude to seek that guidance

to make the unjust, just, and the impossible possible. Amen.