

“The Good Life”

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UCC at The Villages
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I Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

*‘Pray for kings and others in power, so that we may live quiet and peaceful lives
as we worship and honor God.’*

I Tim. 2:2

Let us pray... O God,

The captains and kings of this world are no different than the poorest of the poor –
everybody pays in life, one way or another.

Have mercy upon us all so that we might help each other achieve the ‘good life’.

Amen

The Gospel lesson today is one of those ‘difficult’ texts that don’t allow
for an easy explanation.

Such texts, in and of themselves, are proof the scribes of long ago faithfully copied and
carried forward what was given to them down through the centuries.

This particular one is a mystery as Jesus seems to be advocating
deceptive and desperate behavior, but perhaps it is best explained as a joke –
Jesus was telling a joke.

Do business like this corrupt steward –

behave in the world like this world treats its own,

and you will were surely secure your place in ‘the eternal habitations’.

Please note that Jesus did not say ‘Heaven’...

The world in which Jesus lived is often represented in his parables,
with characters and relationships that correspond to that world.

The absentee landlord, corrupt steward, and farmworkers in debt
all have their contemporary counterparts whose actions illustrate
the mechanisms of coercion and the dynamics of salvation.

That is how the theologians of the Jesus Seminar, through their scholarship,
have interpreted the archaeological discoveries of 1st Century Palestine
to provide a lens for viewing both the ancient world and our own .

Like the people of Jesus’ day we are often at the mercy of events driven by
powers that appear beyond our influence.

The media portrays the rise and fall of such factions as they scramble for advantage
whether it is on the world stage of the war-torn Middle East
or the halls of our own government, national and local.

Just as there is always a bigger fish to prey upon even the big fish,
so are power-brokers themselves broken by powers bigger than them.

Everybody strives to achieve and hold on to the good life, but the ‘least of these’ –
the poorest of the poor, in any situation, generally pay the highest price.

Willard, p.2

In our Epistle lesson today, the Apostle Paul is advising Timothy to pray for the powerful – not only to be inclusive of even those who would persecute the Church, but to play the game of politics. As Bishop of Ephesus, Timothy was a player in the events of his time and even if he wanted to, he couldn't escape the game of political influence. He had to succeed for the sake of the Gospel message of 'the good life' in Christ but for the simple survival of his people, the life of his flock, as well. By praying for the powerful while playing their game, this also meant remaining open for the possibility of their transformation...

Lizette Merchán Pinilla, a contributing writer to the UCC worship webpage, quotes Fred Craddock, a respected authority on preaching, who writes:

*"Being prayerful for political leaders is one thing...
being blindly submissive to them is quite another"*

(Preaching through the Christian Year C).

Ms. Pinilla goes on to say,

'The need of prayer for those in leadership positions represents the hopes for freedom of expression... as well as the hope of gaining the respect which is innate to each one of us. This is not to assume that Christians will be submissive to those who rule, but rather they will join sincere and perhaps challenging efforts ([to]... speak truth to power) with those in leadership positions. Perhaps they will also join forces with those who have different beliefs from their own.'

(Preaching through the Christian Year C).

What we all have to remember is no one gets by on their own

It was back on the campaign trail of the last election, when a candidate was vilified for saying,

"If you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own."

But this is like what Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

'In a real sense all life is inter-related. All persons are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.'

Dr. King goes on to say,

Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be,

and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

This is the inter-related structure of reality.

<http://sojo.net/blogs/2012/08/27/life-death-and-connectedness-company-strangers>

We are all connected, with varying abilities to influence events.

We all have the same vulnerabilities and will come to the same end.

We all have the same need to live lives of meaningful purpose.

We all have to play the game of politics, but how we play that game is important – as believers of Christ, we have to stay on the path, we have to follow The Way, the Way of love...

Willard, p.3

Sometimes our choices are between evils,

and – like a doctor’s Hippocratic oath, we must seek to do no harm.

There is forgiveness as we try and fail and try again to do the right thing –

as we endeavor to do what is most loving in any given situation.

The accumulation of wealth is no more a guarantee of achieving the ‘good life’

any more than the lack of wealth is a sign of failure to live the ‘good life’.

The ‘good life’ is achieved just like any career pursuit –

with single-minded concentration and confidence that the goal can be attained.

The ‘good life’ is like walking a labyrinth... [show labyrinth image]

There is a difference between a labyrinth and a maze –

to get through a maze, you have to be clever to escape its dead-ends and traps,

but a labyrinth only requires that you stay on the path,

a labyrinth only requires you to be faithful...

There are twists and turns and if you don’t pay attention to what you are doing

and you step off the path, you could wind up going right back

where you started from without reaching your goal.

At the conclusion of Jesus’ parable,

the rich man compliments the steward for playing the game.

Jesus appears to be doing the same, yet what he was saying was to this effect:

“Play the game of life shrewdly – get involved, struggle, play hard,

but you don’t have to play the way everyone else does in the world.”

For us as people of faith, there is no *dead end*.

There is always a ‘Way’ through – even if death blocks our way.

That is the advantage of the Christian way of life –

the ‘good life’, the abundant life, eternal life.

We just have to stay on the path, just have to keep a foot on the path

and keep going ahead.

We have to be just as determined as those trying to get ahead

to make a buck in the ‘dog eat dog’ world.

The Bible translation, The Message, interprets Luke 16:9 this way, in which Jesus said,

“I want you to be smart in the same way [as streetwise people]—

but for what is right—

using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival,

to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials,

so you’ll live, really live,

and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

We have to play the game, but we can play differently,

because through Christ we can.

The ‘good life’ is a life that welcomes challenge and

is confident that grace will surely come just as we are willing to keep going.

Amen

*In our scripture lesson today from I Timothy 2:1-7,
the Apostle Paul is giving encouragement and advice to his protégée,
Timothy, the Bishop of Ephesus (EFF-pha-zis).
He makes the point that Jesus is the only way to God,
but that way is open to everyone...*

2:1 First of all, I ask you to pray for everyone.

Ask God to help and bless them all, and tell God how thankful you are
for each of them.

2 Pray for kings and others in power,

so that we may live quiet and peaceful lives as we worship and honor God.

3 This kind of prayer is good, and it pleases God our Savior.

4 God wants everyone to be saved and to know the whole truth, which is,

5 There is only one God, and Christ Jesus is the only one
who can bring us to God.

Jesus was truly human, and he gave himself to rescue all of us.

6 God showed us this at the right time.

7 This is why God chose me to be a preacher and an apostle of the good news.

I am telling the truth. I am not lying.

God sent me to teach the Gentiles about faith and truth.

Luke 16:1-13 [RSV]

[1] He also said to the disciples,

"There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods.

[2] And he called him and said to him,

`What is this that I hear about you?

Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.'

[3] And the steward said to himself,

`What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me?

I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.

[4] I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.'

[5] So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first,

`How much do you owe my master?'

[6] He said,

`A hundred measures of oil.'

And he said to him,

`Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'

[7] Then he said to another,

`And how much do you owe?'

He said,

`A hundred measures of wheat.'

He said to him,

`Take your bill, and write eighty.'

[8] The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness;

for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

[9] And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous [commerce], so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.

[10] "[The one] who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and [the one] who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.

[11] If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous [commerce], who will entrust to you the true riches?

[12] And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?

[13] No servant can serve two masters; for either [they] will hate the one and love the other,

or [they] will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and [commerce]."

Luke 16:1-13 [MSG]

16 1-2 Jesus said to his disciples,

“There was once a rich man who had a manager.

He got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position
by running up huge personal expenses.

So he called him in and said,

‘What’s this I hear about you? You’re fired.

And I want a complete audit of your books.’

3-4 “The manager said to himself,

‘What am I going to do? I’ve lost my job as manager.

I’m not strong enough for a laboring job, and I’m too proud to beg. . . .

Ah, I’ve got a plan. Here’s what I’ll do . . .

then when I’m turned out into the street,
people will take me into their houses.’

5 “Then he went at it.

One after another, he called in the people who were in debt to his master.

He said to the first,

‘How much do you owe my master?’

6 “He replied,

‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’

“The manager said,

‘Here, take your bill, sit down here—quick now—write fifty.’

7 “To the next he said,

‘And you, what do you owe?’

“He answered,

‘A hundred sacks of wheat.’

“He said,

‘Take your bill, write in eighty.’

8-9 “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager!

And why? Because he knew how to look after himself.

Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens.

They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits.

I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—
using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival,
to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials,
so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by
on good behavior.”

10-13 Jesus went on to make these comments:

If you’re honest in small things, you’ll be honest in big things;

If you’re a crook in small things, you’ll be a crook in big things.

If you’re not honest in small jobs,

who will put you in charge of the store?

No worker can serve two bosses: He’ll either hate the first and love the second

Or adore the first and despise the second. You can’t serve both God and the Bank.