

September 23, 2007

Scripture readings: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13

Sermon title: "A Means to an End"

Some of you may remember seeing a movie titled "Cocoon" a number of years ago. It is set in a south Florida retirement village which is right next door to a lovely old estate with rambling gardens and a large elegant pool house. Some unusual neighbors move into the old estate, and they happen to be a group of aliens that look like humans, you know, from outer space. They have a collection of large cocoon-like things that need to stay underwater in the swimming pool.

Well, as the story unfolds, half a dozen of the residents of the retirement village befriend the alien neighbors, and swim on a daily basis in the pool alongside the cocoons. They find that the waters of that pool give them new life, and their strength and stamina is restored as long as they swim in the pool on a regular basis. When the cocoons are about ready to hatch, these spry senior citizens are invited to join with the aliens and leave earth to go to a world where there is no death or aging. On a certain day, at a certain time, a large spaceship is going to come to take them all away to this unknown place of life without end.

It is interesting to see how each of the renewed seniors responds to knowing that their earthly life, with all its cares, will be traded away forever as of a certain hour of a certain day. A couple of them hustle around to get all their affairs in good order, so that their families will not be burdened with any loose ends. One goes out to give his car a good washing. But one, played by Hume Cronyn, has always caught my interest. He goes to his bank, and asks for the exact balance of all of his accounts. He then requests withdrawing every penny that he can claim, and closes his accounts. The bank officials have gathered around, stating that this is most unusual, and does he really understand what he is doing? Of course he does, he says. Then, loaded down with packs of twenties and ones, he turns to leave the bank, handing out handfuls and wads of bills to everyone along his way. He skips down the street giving away his money to every surprised person that he meets.

Wouldn't it be great to live with that kind of abandon? Wouldn't it be fun to take a bunch of money and surprise total strangers with it? It would be great to make somebody's day that way, or even be able to help people with some of their burdens by doing such a thing.

It all points out that money, in and of itself, is not a life goal. Money, all by itself, isn't going to do anything by just sitting in a large accumulated heap. Money is a tool that can be used to do things, but money is only the tool, it is not the goal. It is a means to an end, it is not the end. So, Hume Cronyn's character in the movie does not rely on his life savings in the bank to give him good health, or a loving family, or spiritual peace, or spiritual courage. He does not see it as the measure of his lifetime achievements. Instead, it is something that can be used to get things, and it can also be used to reflect

generosity and concern for others. His wife will be going with him, but not the money. He will be restored and able to love life again, but not because of hanging on to money.

This is the kind of attitude that Jesus teaches in the parable and sayings in today's Gospel lesson. Quite honestly, this parable is very baffling. If you are to go to different commentaries and seek the wisdom of our best scholars as to the meaning of most of the parables in the Gospels, they tend to come to a good measure of agreement as to what Jesus wants to teach to the hearers of the parables. But not this parable. This is not one that is immediately transparent in its meaning to everybody who reads it. Of all things, I did a paper on this parable when I was in seminary and quite foolhardy. Believe me, I found out that a wide breadth of scholarship is puzzled by this passage of Scripture. I noticed that our Sunday School curriculum, which uses the New Common Lectionary Scripture lessons that we use in worship, decided not to take on this odd Gospel lesson today, as well, choosing the lesson from First Timothy instead.

That is because this baffling parable has some problems. First of all, there is a manager of someone's property who is accused of "squandering" the property. Does this mean that he has embezzled the properties in his care? He is also called "dishonest," and this could point to him taking profits that are not his to take. But squandering can also indicate that he was a terrible manager of the estates, that he had missed opportunities for growth and profit at the expense of his boss. Then, when he is called to give an accounting, he summons all of his master's debtors. Is he further cheating the master, or is this reduction in debt actually his own commission, his own rightful cut of the profit that he erases, thus endearing him to the debtors and also making him worthy of the master's praise?

Another problem of this parable: is this parable mostly about the manager, who is praised at the end of the parable for being shrewd, or is it really about an amazingly generous master, who is similar to the father of the prodigal son, who does not exact retribution for squandering property, but surprises everyone by commending and accepting?

And then, how are we to understand verse 9, that seeming conclusion to the parable that says, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." At first glance, it could leave the hearer with the impression that Jesus wants us to go ahead and make a bundle of friends with dishonest wealth, just like the squandering manager, and then see what those friends can do for us when we are knocking on heaven's door. But this self-serving stance just doesn't fit with the larger witness of Scripture, especially when we see Jesus giving to so many people in so many ways and getting nothing in return. So does the "make friends" of verse 9 mean instead that we are to pursue charitable giving, and make new relationships with the people with whom we share our wealth? Maybe it means something like, "Give your wealth to the poor, and do so in such a way that they are not your debtors but your peers, your friends. You will then be welcomed by God into the eternal homes."

Well, we probably won't iron out all of the wrinkles of this parable in our short time together this morning. But here are some things that we can take to heart from these words. Whether the manager has been previously deceitful or only incompetent is really not critical to the point Jesus wants to make. Either way, the manager is dismissed by his master and asked to provide an audit. When the master praises this rascal for reducing the debts owed, it is probably because the manager took away the interest that would have been his own commission, his own cut of the profits. The people of first century Palestine would understand this right away, as they would be familiar with the differing rates for different commodities at that time, the 50 % for olive oil, and the 20% for wheat. Anyone reading this parable that is not a first century Palestinian familiar with crop prices and loans would totally miss this point. Perhaps that is why the other three gospels didn't bother to include this parable as they brought the Good News of Jesus to so many other lands and peoples in the decades following the first telling of this parable.

But what we can get from this parable is the idea that money – or other resources entrusted to us – can be employed to make friends instead of debtors. Friendship involves commonality and equality, not indebtedness. Halvor Moxnes writes, “To ‘make friends’ by ‘unrighteous mammon,’ therefore, was the opposite of enslaving people in need. To ‘make friends’ by giving to those in need has a liberating effect. It meant to put people on the same footing.” (*Halvor Moxnes, The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988, pp. 142-143.*)

This is like the message that Jesus gave to the Pharisee that hosted Jesus for dinner in chapter 14. Instead of inviting your best friends, your rich neighbors, the people you already know, and the people that can repay you, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Make them your friends. Make them your equal. Don't just keep them at arm's length or continually in the position of poverty.

Keep in mind that the time of Jesus was a time in which the people of the land of Palestine had to pay a large number of taxes to the occupying Romans, and even to the Jewish priestly class in Jerusalem. Susanne Heine writes that each year about a quarter of the crop had to be paid, in addition to taxes on lands, different types of offerings, customs duties, tolls for using the roads, and so forth. Unpaid services of food, shelter, and goods were demanded to support the occupation troops. (*Susanne Heine, Women and early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?, trans. John Bowden; London:SCM Press, 1987, pp. 56-57.*) Times got tighter and tighter, and each year property had to be confiscated. More landowners lost their land, and therefore their good livelihood. Add to this burden of taxation and debt the bad harvests, the famines, the epidemics, especially the 20's and the 60's of the first century, and one begins to get a picture of the people hearing this parable for the first time. Anything that sounded like removal of debt sounded like mercy and grace to those people. And so the shrewd little manager becomes a picture of one who throws away his legal right to money, and uses it to free the burden upon others. As he lightens their burden, he in effect says, “Now I choose to be one of you, not over you, but one of you, and I cast my lot by your side.”

As Jesus concludes the parable with several sayings, he underscores some things about the relation between a person and material wealth. Responsibility and reliability include more than honesty in accounting procedures. Wealth can easily become an idol to which one bows and scrapes. What is it, really, that we do with our wealth and our material gifts? Do we hoard and accumulate it, as if getting more and more of it is the only thing that matters in life? And if that is what we do, does our money handling create communities of indebtedness? Do the rich get richer while the poor get poorer by what we do with our money? Or does our money handling “make friends”? Does it give a foothold to others so that they can empower themselves and become our peers instead of our weakened dependents?

Turn on your TV, or pick up a magazine, and all the ads would have you think that money and “stuff” is what makes the world go around. However, this thought-provoking parable teaches us that money is not the ultimate end of human life. It is only a tool, a means to an end. What is your “end”? What is the ultimate goal of your life? That old guy in the movie *Cocoons* found his greatest joy in giving his money away joyously and unconditionally. May God move us to use our money and resources with wisdom, with generosity, and with love. May God keep us from being owned by our money and things. May we use it instead as a wonderful God-given and God-entrusted tool, so that all might find the life and joy of Jesus Christ. Amen.