

Season Of Creation 3: "Loving Embrace" September 18, 2016 Amos 8: 4-12;
A Reading from the Mystics from: *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*; Luke 16:1-13

It's definitely crisis time. This *Parable of the Dishonest Steward* is about a man who's in big trouble. He's about to lose his job in an economy that doesn't provide unemployment benefits or career retraining programs. In all likelihood, "digging ditches" meant slavery. But Jesus, who as we know liked to tell parables about how life is like in the realm of God, uses this imagined crisis to show how reversals are possible in even the most dire situation.

Not that the message is readily apparent. This is one of the more difficult parables of Jesus; it defies easy interpretation. Do we really hear Jesus commending these corrupt people? We want to be careful not to allegorize them and see, for instance, the wealthy landowner as God. That takes us down a convoluted path that leads to a dead end.

Instead, we want to read this as a parable about the economy of 1st century Galilee. You see, in those days, wealthy landlords were loan sharks; they would charge exorbitant interest rates in order to dispossess peasants of their family land and amass more property for themselves. So those who heard this parable would know that the rich man and his steward, his debt collector, were both exploiting the desperate, debt-ridden poor.

Now these practices were in direct violation of biblical law. Torah expressly forbids charging interest on a loan. But then, like now, wealthy landlords found ways around this and other prohibitions. All the way back in Amos' day (750 BCE), the poor were targets of greed and corruption: *Listen to this, you who live off the needy and oppress the poor of the land, you who say, "If only the new moon were over so we could sell our grain," and "When Sabbath is over, we will sell our wheat charging higher prices for smaller portions, thus tilting the scales in our favor. That way, we can buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals - and even make a profit on the chaff of the wheat."*

So this parable, like Amos' prophecy, was an indictment of the economy of the day. When the steward reduced the payments, he may have been simply forgiving his own cut of the interest, which had been rolled into the principal. Or he may have just been doing what Torah commands, namely forgiving all the hidden interest in the contracts, changing the amount they owed to exactly the amount they borrowed. And the landlord, knowing the teaching against interest, maybe suddenly recognized that he needed at least to appear to be observing Torah, and commended his steward for his shrewdness.

The problem is that, no matter how you read it, neither of these characters is commendable. Wrong has been done. So where does Jesus want us to side?

And now we notice that there are other characters in the story: the debtors. They are not minor players because in any reading of the gospels, we can't help recognizing the concern Jesus has for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, those burdened by debt. Those who heard this parable would know that debt contracts included exorbitant hidden interest. We can easily find analogies today: high-interest student loans, predatory payday loans, or harsh austerity measures imposed on countries whose citizens had no role in agreeing to a debt. The Lutheran World Federation calls oppressive debt terms imposed on Honduras and other Latin American countries "illegitimate debt" and likens it to "violence," because of its crushing effects on people's futures.

So the focus of the parable is not on either of the two main characters. And it's not even on the debtors. Rather, as a strategist for the first President Clinton's campaign famously said, "It's the economy, stupid." And in this Season of Creation, we would add, "It's the economy *and* the environment" because our care for creation is inextricably tied into our economic systems - where it gets very complicated.

In June, the City Council of Oakland voted to ban the storage, handling and export of coal traveling from Utah to Asia through a proposed new marine terminal at the defunct Oakland Army Base. Along with concerns about health and safety, broader environmental concerns about climate change were a large part of the public debate about the issue.

But the decision did not come without cost. The council voted for the ban despite the fact that in doing so they would forfeit 1,000 construction jobs and 120 permanent jobs at the terminal. Backers of the proposal, including some churches, maintained the proposal would bring badly needed jobs to an impoverished area. City leaders had the unenviable task of weighing the environmental dangers of bringing millions of tons of coal through the area with the economic benefits of good-paying jobs.

How would Jesus vote? The poor, who are disproportionately victims of ecological racism, living in areas that are environmentally hazardous, seem to get the short end of the stick either way in this decision. Clean air or jobs? Mayor Libby Schaaf, who backed the ban said that the choice between jobs on the one hand, and health and safety on the other, was a "false choice." And while the prospect of 1000 jobs is nothing to sneeze at, she's right in avoiding a choice between care for the unemployed for and all those who would be affected by environmental degradation. "It's the economy, stupid" - but not built on the backs of the poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

There's a folksinger named Peggy Seeger, half-sister to Pete. And there's song that I heard her sing years ago at the Winnipeg Folk Festival. It's called "For a Job" and I remember the discomfort it raised in me at the time because it portrays this "false choice" we so often buy into.

He'd give the world for a job
'Cause the job's his world
The earth's his oyster, he's the pearl
Gives him something to do, money in hand
Without a job a man's not a man
A man needs a job

Man on a mountain
Tearing that mountain down
Man in a forest, building another town

The world is his wherever he goes
To do what he wants with
'Cause the world owes every man a job

What would he give for a job?
His heart and his lungs
Mutilate his body; father mutant sons
Silicon and lint, espestis and coal
The world wants life, man wants control
But he'd give up life for a job

Environmental justice or jobs? That can't be the choice. There has to be an overhaul of our economic system that attends to the truth that you can't worship God and money. Not that I'm advocating overtly religious economic policies. But subversely – oh, yes. Worshipping God includes care for “the least of these” and care for the Earth. Our advocacy, voting, and civic engagement should come right out of our religious foundation, whether or not we ever call it that.

Pope Francis gets it. In *Laudato Si* he wrote: “. . . it should always be kept in mind that “environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces.” We need to reject a magical conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals. Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations? Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention. Moreover, biodiversity is considered at most a deposit of economic resources available for exploitation, with no serious thought for the real value of things, their significance for persons and cultures, or the concerns and needs of the poor.”

Neither money nor the economy is not the root of all evil; making an idol of either one is. As the parable illustrates, you can use money (filthy lucre) for good, even within a corrupt system. Even those two disreputable characters did good in spite of themselves. And so can we. We can work within politics, the economy, the social structures of our day – with all their imperfections – and work for good. In the confusing, conflicting claims put upon us, we have these teachings of Jesus that we can look to for our priorities. And then we do the best we can under the circumstances.

Finally, we look again to the mystics for good news in our environmental crisis. People in the 13th century didn't face the same ecological issues that we do, but Meister Eckhart's words are still relevant. As we take with us the admonitions of Amos and Jesus, may we also take his advice to "apprehend God in all things."

May we take his message that "every single creature is full of God and is a book about God and every creature is a word of God" as a literal spiritual directive. This week, can you find a creature on which to meditate – a caterpillar, a puppy, a kitty, a fish, a bird, a flower (dahlia garden) - and allow it to teach you the ways of God?

Such a simple-sounding practice. Yet it may be just what Mother Earth needs us to do in order to care for her and all her creatures.

Amen

Amos 8: 4-12

Listen to this, you who live off the needy and oppress the poor of the land, you who say, "If only the new moon were over so we could sell our grain," and "When Sabbath is over, we will sell our wheat charging higher prices for smaller portions, thus tilting the scales in our favor. That way, we can buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals - and even make a profit on the chaff of the wheat."

YHWH swears by the pride of Jacob: "I will never forget a single thing you have done." Will not the land tremble because of this and all who dwell in it mourn? Will the land not rise up like the Nile, rising and sinking like the river of Egypt?

"That day - it is the Sovereign YHWH who speaks - I will make the sun set at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation. I will have your loins in sackcloth, your heads all shaved. I will make the land mourn as one would mourn for a dead child - all of this on that bitter day!

"The time is coming - it is the Sovereign YHWH who speaks - when I will send famine on the land: not a famine of bread or thirst for water, but a famine of not hearing the words of YHWH. People will stagger from sea to sea, and wander from north to east seeking revelation from YHWH, but will not find it."

A Reading from the Mystics

From: Meditations with Meister Eckhart

Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things.

Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.

Every creature is a word of God.

If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature –
even a caterpillar –
I would never have to prepare a sermon.
So full of God is every creature.

Luke 16:1-13

Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a wealthy landowner who, having received reports of a steward mismanaging the property, summoned the steward and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? Give me an account of your service, for it’s about to come to an end.’

The steward thought, ‘What will I do next? My employer is going to fire me. I can’t dig ditches. I’m ashamed to go begging. I have it! Here’s a way to make sure that people will take me into their homes when I’m let go.’“

So the steward called in each of the landowner’s debtors. The steward said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my employer?’

The debtor replied, ‘A hundred jars of oil.’

The steward said, ‘Take your invoice, sit down quickly and make it fifty.’

To another the steward said, ‘How much do you owe?’

The answer came, ‘A hundred measures of wheat,’ and the steward said, ‘Take your invoice and make it eighty.’“

Upon hearing this, the owner gave this devious worker credit for being enterprising! Why? Because the children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light. So I tell you: make friends for yourselves through your use of this world’s goods, so that when they fail you, you’ll be welcomed into an eternal home. If you can trust others in little things, you can also trust them in greater, and anyone unjust in a slight matter will also be unjust in a greater. If you can’t be trusted with filthy lucre, who will trust you with true riches? And if you haven’t been trustworthy with someone else’s money, who will give you your own?

“Subordinates can’t have two superiors. Either they’ll hate the one and love the other, or be attentive to the one and despise the other. You can’t worship both God and money.”