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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W36  
18 Pentecost (Proper 20C) 11:00 a.m., 6 p.m. Eucharist  
Sunday 18 September 2016

Amos 8:4-7  
Ps. 113  
1 Tim. 2:1-7  
Lk. 16:1-13

### **The Unthinkable Debt**

“No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth” (Lk. 16:1-13).

Imagine that this is the last day of your life. Are you ready to die? What if this was your last moment. What are you feeling? What do you wish you had done differently? Have you really lived? Or have you wasted your time with unimportant things, with worry, blame, denial and false regrets. What do you wish you did more of... or less of?<sup>1</sup>

Ancient Greek philosophers used thought experiments like this to remind themselves that we will not live forever. They believed that this kind of exercise could help us understand what really matters and that this could change us for the better.

Let me introduce three Greek important words from these ancient teachers. To describe the goal of human life ancient they used the word eudaimonia. Literally it means “good spirit” but most often it is translated as happiness, welfare, joy, human flourishing. It means living well in every sense: being successful, enjoying pleasure, making a difference. Aristotle called this happiness (eudaimonia) the highest good.

Although they disagreed about so much, ancient Greek philosophical schools including: the Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics agreed that the best way to achieve eudaimonia was through ataraxia which we could define as tranquility or imperturbability, a kind of freedom from worry. Ataraxia means to keep an even keel, to not be swept away by either good fortune or disaster. It means to have control over our feelings and the way we respond to the world. For Aristotle phronesis is practical wisdom and the way in which among other things we recognize the importance of this control.<sup>2</sup>

I’m grateful for their reflections on how to live but Jesus offers us so much more. The gospel uses this same word for wisdom but Jesus teaches that life can be more than just a struggle to control our emotions. Like a blue whale ranging across the vast Pacific Ocean or the Arctic Tern, a bird that migrates between the Arctic breeding grounds and the Antarctic each year, we have a homing instinct.

Hidden within every person lies an equally mysterious and reliable map for finding our way home to God. It shows where we came from and how to return. Through his parables Jesus teaches that God’s kingdom is already breaking into this world and that if we learn to pay attention we can be part of it.

Like the ancient Greek philosophers Jesus gives us thought experiments, stories to help us understand the meaning of God’s kingdom. We call them parables. They help us to think the unthinkable. Jesus probably meant them to be jarring, to disorient us and make us question what is reliable and stable. Parables upend the world because the good news of Jesus changes the meaning of everything for us.

Unlike most other parables, today's appears only in the Gospel of Luke. Many people find it difficult and deeply unsatisfying. I have read over a dozen commentaries and sermons on it. The only easy way to interpret it is to make unwarranted assumptions about the context.

After addressing the religious leaders Jesus turns to speak to his disciples. He tells them the story of a manager for a rich absentee landlord. A crisis occurs when the manager hears that he is going to be charged with squandering the wealthy man's property. Too weak for labor and too ashamed to beg he anticipates being let go and decides on a plan. He goes to each person who owes his employer and reduces the debt on the account books: from one hundred jugs of olive oil to fifty, from one hundred sheaves of wheat to eighty.

The story takes a perplexing turn when the rich man commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. Jesus adds on several sayings that leave us unsure just where we stand. He says that the children of the age are more shrewd than the children of light, that we should make friends with dishonest wealth, that whoever is faithful in small matters is likely to be faithful in larger ones. Jesus concludes saying, "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Lk. 16).

Some interpreters simplify the problem this raises and argue that the manager only gave away his own commission but this is not at all clear from the text. Others point out that foreign absentee landlords had a terrible reputation for cruelty. On Thursday night the reading from 2 Kings (4:1-7) was about a widow whose creditors were about to sell her children into slavery. The word Luke uses for the "charges" against the manager is *diaballow*. It means accusation and is related to the word *accuser* which is also the name for the devil.

Furthermore it is not completely clear that this is a dishonest manager. The word in Greek is not "dishonest" it is *adikias* or unrighteous. Because the genitive case is tricky one cannot quite say if he himself is unrighteous or simply a manager of unrighteous things. Perhaps forgiving debts is the right thing to do even if the manager does it for the wrong reasons.

In any event preachers assure their congregations that the point of the story is not for us to act dishonestly. Just as the manager faces a crisis in his life and must act intelligently, people of faith need practical wisdom as we face the crisis of God's kingdom. What matters is the contrast Jesus draws between faithfulness and unrighteousness. His point is that our use of wealth has serious spiritual implications.

You know the parable is beginning to do its work when you find your world turned upside down. This week after studying this parable for twenty hours the effect it had on me was to unsettle my understanding of money and debt.

In our time, the market, our economic system, functions as a kind of unacknowledged religion. Our religious language carries within it economic metaphors of sin, debt, forgiveness, freedom and redemption. But our economic ideas also include assumptions about value and morality.<sup>3</sup> Jesus' parable confuses us partly because of our deep sense

that debts must be paid. A manager who dissolves these obligations troubles us because we tend to treat money and credit as our gods.

The anthropologist and activist David Graeber tells the following story about the Third World debt crisis. In the 1970's OPEC countries began investing their large oil profits in western banks. These banks made loans to small, poor countries, or rather to their dictators and politicians who then deposited large sums of this money into their private Swiss bank accounts. Although interest rates were initially lower, tight monetary policies in the United States during the 1980's and 1990's drove these rates much higher and the loans began to fail.<sup>4</sup>

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) stepped in and, as a condition of refinancing, forced poor countries to abandon price supports for food, to deplete strategic food reserves and to abandon free healthcare and free education for some of the poorest people on earth. This had many terrible effects including taking food from children who need it. One concrete example of this suffering involves the way that these IMF policies led to the abandonment of a relatively cheap anti-Malaria program in Madagascar. Ten thousand people died there as a result. This all happened so that Citibank didn't have to cut its losses on an irresponsible loan.<sup>5</sup>

Whether we are creditors We assume that loans are entered into freely and arranged on a fair basis when that might be an exception in history. Jesus' parable points to a kind of invisible and implicit violence in the way that loans can function. Loans can keep people permanently in poverty. Our bias that indebted people deserve some kind of punishment make it hard for us to notice the signs of God's kingdom in which there is enough for all.

You may not understand it but this is how Jesus' parable has turned my world upside down. What is fair, who is good, what are our responsibilities to each other, seem less clear than when I started the week. Money, our systems of debt and credit, feel less reliable and real to me now in the face of God's generous love.

Earlier I mentioned the thought experiments that Greek philosophers used to communicate practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and to control their feelings (*ataraxia*). They did this to attain the happiness (*eudaimonia*) that they describe as the highest good. This story of Jesus does not create in us the sense of the disinterestedness (*ataraxia*) which Greek philosophers believed would lead us on to happiness (*eudaimonia*). The story Jesus offers this morning involves finding our way back home by removing the barriers that stand between us and God.

The German mystical teacher Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) understood this acutely.<sup>6</sup> He writes that all things owe their being to God, and that it is, "God's endeavor to give himself to us entirely." In response to God's love we are, "becoming as we were before we were born."<sup>7</sup> We do this by abandoning our attachment to worldly things so that we can direct our lives back toward God. Eckhart says, "we come alive when we give away what [we have] received."<sup>8</sup>

The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda writes about a moment in his childhood when an unknown neighborhood boy left a toy (a wholly white sheep) for him at a hole in his

back fence. He then left a toy for him in return. He writes, "To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life. But to feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses – that is something greater and more beautiful because it widens the boundaries of our being, and unites all living things... That exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea: that all humanity is somehow together. This is the great lesson I learned in my childhood in the backyard of a lonely house."<sup>9</sup>

Let us pray: God of Mystery, you find grace even in the devious and compromised.<sup>10</sup>  
We thank you that today is not our last day and that you have walked so far with us to bring us to this holy place. Inspire our hearts to make good use of what you have given us as we rejoice in your unfolding kingdom. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> When I tried this thought experiment myself I felt a wave of gratitude for this year at Grace Cathedral, for these amazing experiences of beauty in worship, for new friends, the choirs, the breathtaking space, Easter and Christmas, quiet foggy mornings as tourists discover our art, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty-One Attempts at an Answer* (NY: Other Press, 2010), 109-110.

<sup>3</sup> Introductory economics textbooks even have the equivalent of origin narratives. Like the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden they speculate about a time when people bartered for everything they had and the way that this system grew into the invention of money. This story and others like it are not based on anthropological evidence but have been a central part of how we pass economic ideas from one generation to the next.

<sup>4</sup> David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (NY: Melville Publishing, 2011) 2-4.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps even more damning Graeber writes about the United States as an empire with hundreds of overseas military bases. He describes the loan costs as a kind of tribute paid by client states.

<sup>6</sup> Once someone came to Meister Eckhart and complained that no one could understand his sermons. He said, "To understand my preaching, five things are needed. The hearer must have conquered strife; he must be contemplating his highest good; he must be satisfied to do God's bidding; he must be a beginner among beginners; and denying himself, he must be so a master of himself as to be incapable of anger." Margaret Ruth Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 194.

<sup>7</sup> Edward F. Mooney, "A Lyric Philosophy of Place," *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell* (NY: Continuum, 2009) 31, 48.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (NY: Vintage Books, 1979) 54-55.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>10</sup> This line comes from Steven Shakespeare, *Prayers for an Inclusive Church* (NY: Church Publishing, 2009) 105.