

When the Future is on the Line

Amos 8:4-7

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Luke 16:1-8

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I want you to think of a number – but not just any number. Think of the number 160 million. Try to imagine what 160 million looks like – not written out, but as the number of something real. In this case, that something is close to half the population of the United States.

Now imagine that half of the U.S. population to be the least wealthy, the poorest half if you like. Some people in that 160 million are homeless and destitute, many more are simply poor, many are elderly and living on pensions or Social Security. But most live in households where someone is employed and the household income is at least 5 figures. Some may even live in households where the total income reaches the low 6 figures. 160 million is a lot of people, making lots of money, doing lots of work, requiring and providing lots of resources. Yet, when it comes to wealth, everyone in the other half of the U.S. population has more.

I'm not sure just how much more – but five years ago, when the statistics were run, it only took the three wealthiest men in the U.S. to equal to total wealth of this 160 million people. Then the three wealthiest men (and they were men), were Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Warren Buffett. Today Elon Musk has replaced Buffet among the top three.

Does it strike you that there is anything wrong with this picture? [Warren Buffett seems to be a nice guy. Bill Gates, maybe. Jeff Bezos, not so much. Elon Musk, least of all. But does that matter one way or another?]

In the eighth century BCE, there was a man named Amos, a shepherd from some hick place called Tekoa in the southern kingdom of Judah. A man of humble origins, he was also a pincher of sycamore fruit. This fruit, which had to be pinched so that it would ripen to an edible state, was used only by the poor. It was a time of prosperity and peace, which came with an expansion of trade. A rich merchant class developed, sharing the region's wealth with the nobility and building for themselves elaborate homes.

Marketing his fruit and wool took Amos to the trading centers of the northern kingdom of Israel. There he saw first-hand the exploitation of the poor and the oppression of the dispossessed at the hand of the rich. He saw not only the summer homes of the wealthy decorated with ivory and gold, he saw the small farmer disinherited of his land to make possible the development of large estates. He saw not only the luxury of beautiful vineyards and gardens, but also the gluttony and debauchery of those who stretched themselves upon their couches. He saw the harried poor who could not pay their debts sold into slavery, and those who bought them for silver or a pair of sandals. He saw the courts corrupted by bribes so that justice could only be afforded by the rich, and he saw those who sold the refuse of their wheat and weighed their grain in false balances. He saw a society being deeply divided between two classes, the dissolute rich and the embittered

poor. The rich were getting richer and the poor were becoming poorer.

Thanks to Martin Luther King, Amos is best known in our time for his call for “justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” But like Dr. King, his indictment of his society ran much deeper than most of his contemporaries were willing to hear. This morning’s text provides just a snippet – a small sample – of that wide-ranging indictment. He indicts those who “trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.” He observes those who cannot wait until the sabbath is over to resume their shady business practices, making the ephah (a measure of grain) small, and the shekel (the coin required in payment) great. In other words, fraudulently selling at inflated prices. Read the rest of Amos and see that he’s not just pointing his finger at a few shady business practices, he’s taking on the whole economic system and the political and judicial and religious systems that enable, sustain, and promote it.

So it’s not about a few bad apples. The judgment that Amos pronounces falls on the whole of Israel. As biblical scholar Gene Tucker notes in the introduction to Amos in the Harper Collins Study Bible, “Amos is the first [prophet] we know of who announced total and complete judgment upon Israel.” As Amos saw it, a crisis point had been reached. The nation had to be held accountable for its social injustice and religious arrogance. A terrible future was in store. In their case, a total military disaster awaited. And so, in fact, it came to pass, some forty years later, when Israel was conquered by the Assyrians.

Fast forward almost 800 years to consider this morning’s second text, a parable recorded in the Gospel of Luke. This parable has traditionally been known as “The Unjust Steward.” More recently, it has been called “The Dishonest Manager.” Either way, it continues to puzzle interpreters, myself included. And, I should note, most scholars consider it to be an authentic parable of Jesus, at least through the middle of verse 8.

The steward, or manager, in the parable is not an honorable fellow. Nor is there anything admirable about the rich master who employs him. Yet, at the end of the parable, presumably the rich man, but possibly Jesus himself, praises this dishonest manager for his “shrewdness.” It seems that for some reason or other, Jesus found reason to credit the behavior of the dishonest manager and hold it up for example.

Jesus’ parables draw on real-world conditions and experiences, and this one is no exception. Let’s revisit the scene of the crime. The background circumstances are true to first-century life, and not all that different from those of Israel in the time of Amos. There is an exceedingly wealthy landed class, a rich elite, and then there is everybody else – many of whom live a bare subsistence existence as peasants, tenant farmers, fishers, herders, tradespeople, and such. Biblical scholar William Herzog envisions the circumstances this way:

The steward [aka manager] belonged to the class of retainers who executed the will of the elites. In this case, the steward is highly placed in the household bureaucracy of a rich and powerful elite. The rich master is often absent due to his endless pursuit of power

and prestige, retaining what he has and fending off hostile attacks while at the same time accumulating more by launching hostile takeovers where feasible. The master counts on his steward to manage his estate and to realize a profit large enough to support his lifestyle and provide the resources needed to fuel his endless political struggle with other elites. The steward therefore occupies a powerful but vulnerable position. He is constantly susceptible to back-stabbing and calumny from disgruntled debtors or tenants. Of course, they would not complain to his master that the steward is too severe; the master would take that as a testimony to his steward's thoroughness . . . Instead, they would accuse the steward – (Parables as Subversive Speech, 243-44)

In this case, the accusation is one of squandering his master's property – an unforgivable offense, from the rich man's perspective.

Just what sort of squandering might have been possible on the manager's part is unclear. Moreover, we're not told whether the accusations are true. But the parable suggests that the manager kept the books, so to speak, on the rich man's accounts. It appears the manager had responsibility for negotiating the contracts for the annual yields of the master's fields and orchards.

There's not time here this morning to elaborate on the agricultural economics of the first century, and just how the manager might have engaged in creative bookkeeping to his own material advantage. In fact, in my experience those of us who are honest in our financial transactions have a difficult time imaging all the ways this can be done today – both legally and illegally. Does anyone here know how many multi-billion-dollar corporations have managed to avoid paying one cent of federal income taxes? Or how it is that 45% of all new income goes to the top 1%, and that CEOs of large corporations make a record-breaking 350 times what their workers earn? Or how someone like our former President has thus far managed to avoid criminal prosecution and imprisonment for fraudulent financial dealings?

Back to the parable. The manager, who may or may not have been honest before, is told, "You're fired" by his rich employer. So the manager says to himself, "What am I going to do?" He realizes immediately his existential crisis. There's no good way to turn. He won't be able to get another cushy white-collar job. He has no experience in any skilled trade. The best he can hope for is scut labor – digging ditches – and he's not been working out at the gym, plus he's probably too old, so no way is he strong enough for that. And he's too ashamed to beg. That's way too horrible to contemplate. If there were any tall buildings or high cliffs, he'd probably be looking for a place to jump.

But then it comes to him. He needs to make some friends among the master's clientele. Maybe some of them will take him in and let him stay. This crisis calls for some cooking of the books. So he meets up with each of his master's debtors, and he writes off a major part of each one's debt. He reduces one debt from one hundred jugs of olive oil to fifty. He reduces another from one hundred containers of wheat to eighty. And so on, for all the rest. He does all the debtors a

big favor. Maybe they will remember him kindly if and when he is put out on the street.

That's all the parable tells us, except for this conclusion: "The master praised the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." Hmm. Well, according to Matthew, Jesus did once say we should be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." The Scholar's Version actually translates that "you must be as sly as a snake and as simple as a dove." [10:16] Maybe shrewdness, or slyness, or worldly wisdom, was something Jesus actually commended. As I mentioned earlier, the parable is puzzling. But it does seem like it is holding up some sort of vision of how to act in the face of dire or threatening circumstances. Certainly many members of the early Jesus movement saw themselves under threat. They preserved sayings attributed to Jesus that warned of the necessity to be prepared for future eventualities for which no one knows the day or the hour, life-changing events that may come "like a thief in the night".

I'm inclined to think that Jesus' own expectations about the future were more open-ended, less fearful, more confident. But I'm also inclined to think that he wanted his disciples to be serious, or to get serious, when it comes to understanding the ways of the world and the need to consider what might be necessary in a hugely messed-up world to enact the commonwealth of God.

I like the way the Scholar's Version translates the final phrase of this morning's text, a phrase that probably did not come from Jesus but was added by Luke: "for the children of this world exhibit better sense in dealing with their own kind than do the children of light." [15:8b]

"The children of this world" – aka the rich man, and all his fellow elite; the manager; the clients who gladly let him cook the books; and everyone else who is content with a world where money and wealth and power all conspire to call the shots.

"The children of light" – how some in the early Jesus movement must have thought of themselves, as disciples of Jesus, as believers in God and in God's future of peace and justice and equity, of honesty and integrity and kindness, of mutual respect and compassion and love.

But this future is not going to come without tremendous resistance and opposition. And it certainly will not come by itself.

The dishonest manager found his way to deal with the existential threat he faced. The best lesson I can draw from this parable is that we need to find ways to deal with the existential threats to our existence, and we need to act decisively and effectively, because our futures are on the line, and the collective future of humanity is on the line.

Unfortunately, the existential threats to our existence are many – though it may be that they all follow from our inability to create economically and socially just societies that meet everyone's need without succumbing to anyone's greed. The earth may still have enough resources for everyone on the planet to flourish, but the distribution of those resources – and their excessive

consumption by virtually all of us in the first world and the second world – have made climate change the greatest existential threat of our time. It's too late to avoid the threat altogether, though it may not be too late to mitigate it, but only if we are willing to change our way of life. Unfettered capitalism, together with consumerism, is a death sentence.

War, especially nuclear war, also remains an existential threat. So do racism, fascism, and white nationalism, all of which – in conjunction with the enormous disparities in wealth and power – have emerged as major challenges to our democratic way of life. If we do not effectively counter them, if political suppression and demagogic authoritarianism prevail, the nuclear threat and climate change will only grow worse. Sadly, many if not most Americans are oblivious or in deep denial regarding the existential crises of our time, while many others seem only too eager to push us to the brink.

The poet William Butler Yeats wrote in his poem, “The Second Coming,” “the best lack all conviction while the worst are filled with passionate intensity.” Whether or not Jesus would have agreed, I don't know. But I cannot make any better sense of his parable than to conclude that he would not want it to be so for us . Amen.