

Pentecost 18C + September 18, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Luke 16:1-13

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From the beginning of time, or at least since the beginning of currency, people have cheated others out of their money using various forms of trickery. Probably the most infamous in our time is the Ponzi Scheme, in which an individual or organization pays returns to investors, not from legitimate profit but from the money of new investors enticed by promises of high returns. This can go on and on, because false reports of these high returns can encourage investors to leave all their money in. This all goes along until investors get suspicious and start withdrawing their money, only to find there isn't any, or until the perpetrator takes what he has and disappears.

Obviously, people who do this to their fellow human beings are not children of light, in the phrase used in our Gospel reading today. Instead, Jesus calls them "children of this age." In this age, our age, in which the devil still controls the world, we would call them liars, thieves, cheats, or whatever unsavory language people might use when their life savings are wiped away by these schemes.

Here in Luke 16 we have a money manager who has been discovered to have squandered his master's wealth. A liar. A cheat. So shouldn't he be facing the rich man's wrath? Instead, because of yet another scheme he perpetrates that drains the bank accounts even further, the master commends his manager as having acting shrewdly.

Let's step back and take a broader look. First, we must discount the fact of the manager's initial dishonesty, which here is an event of the past. Its only significance in this parable is that it has resulted in this manager being in a tough situation. Because his initial dishonesty was discovered, he realizes he's about to lose everything—his job, his social status, the roof over his

head. Back then, becoming a wealthy person's manager was not only a way to move up the social ladder, it also guaranteed you a place to live.

This fellow is about to be put out on the street. He's been self-sufficient up to this point, but now he knows he needs friends. So he comes up with the idea of striking deals with his master's debtors, giving them generous breaks on what they owe. "You owe 100 jugs of oil? Make it 50." "You owe 100 containers of wheat? Make it 80." And presumably on down the line until everyone leaves, grateful for their good fortune.

Now, if you were the wealthy owner, wouldn't you be even MORE upset with this manager? You'd probably wish you'd have kicked him out when his initial dishonesty was discovered. Now he's been able to squander even more of your wealth!

But what happens? The manager is praised by his master as being shrewd—showing sharp powers of judgment! What in the world is going on here?

Well, the answer is that, in this Gospel reading, we are NOT in the world. As he does in all his parables, Jesus is showing us what the Kingdom of God looks like, as juxtaposed against the realm of this world, with the devil still in control and our selfish pride run amok

Jesus is telling us that that this is how the "children of light" act with money or resources they happened to have before them, for whatever reason. They are to use this money to further the cause of social solidarity, which, in God's kingdom, means that the rich and poor behave toward each other as equal friends and inheritors of God's grace.

The manager gives all these people breaks on their debts because he wants to be their friend, and we can only presume he succeeds. The barrier of social class has been erased. We are left to picture him staying with his new friends a week here, three weeks there, until he gets his life back on track.

Friends, we too are people of God, children of light. So let us find ways to be in social solidarity with the fellow human beings in our community, those from whom we are now divided by reason of economic status. “Let proud divisions end,” we sing in one of our hymns. None of us has the wealth of this rich man. But we do have resources before us. How we came by them is not the issue, although certainly they were gained honestly. How we USE them IS the issue. If we act faithfully with what our forebears at Atonement Lutheran Church have entrusted us with—a warm and inspiring sanctuary, wonderful fellowship areas, a debt-free building, great infrastructure, and a rich history—then God will entrust to us the true riches of new life and new abundance.

Imagine all the ways in which Atonement can be a people and a place where the kingdom of God is visible to our community and city. Let us be creative and work side by side to bring this church into a new age--the age that is modeled throughout Luke’s Gospel, where Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors, and in which the blind, the poor and the lame are invited to the Great Banquet. Please share your ideas with me and with others for what our future might look like. I can’t wait to hear them!

May the peace and joy of the risen Christ live in your hearts always.

AMEN.