

“Manna People”

Exodus 16
Luke 16:1-15

By Heidi Worthen Gamble, September 2008

Today's gospel lesson is a story about debt, bailouts, and money. In the parable, we meet a middle manager in charge of a rich man's estate. After being fired because of rumors that he was wasting the rich man's money, this middle manager cuts significant percentages off of two tenants' debts owed to the estate. You owe 800 gallons of olive oil? Let's make it 400. You owe 100 bushels of wheat? Make it 80. Basically, he engaged in some very questionable accounting practices in order to win favor with a couple of debtors.

And then Jesus says, “The rich man commended the dishonest manager because he had acted cleverly.” And then in verse 9 he adds, “I tell you, use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” This is a rather curious saying, don't you think? Is Jesus saying this middle manager did something right by bailing out debtors? Well, yes. In fact, rather rogue middle manager becomes the model for Jesus' teaching on the right relationship with wealth. It was not at all unlike Jesus to make the hero of a parable someone most people found offensive, but I think that by knowing a little about how debt worked during Jesus' time, and understanding more clearly what kind of debt was likely being written off by this middle manager, we can gain an even greater appreciation for what he did and understand more fully why he did something of great spiritual value for us to learn from, and especially relevant to our context this week as a nation.

During the time of Jesus, which was first century Palestine, there were basically two economic classes: those who and those who had not. Those who “had not” were 90% of the population—the peasant class—who were forced to live their lives in poverty, forever walking the fine line between subsistence and starvation, much like the 1 billion poorest people today. The wealthy elite—like the rich man in this parable—were 2% of the population. The wealthy elite were the land holders whose interests were to ever-expand their land holdings for all of the reasons true for the wealthy elite of our time--to improve their social status, their political stability, and comfortable and lavish lifestyles. The remaining 8% of the population was a collection of folks like middle managers, accountants, and tax collectors who did the ruling elite's bidding. They were the middle class, much like many of us here today. They had a measured amount of power and modest wealth.

Middle managers were resented by the peasantry because they managed the landholding elite's estates through a process called “debt manipulation”. This is how the system worked if you were a peasant in Jesus' time: As a peasant, you rented a small plot of land from a large land owner and you usually paid your rent by paying a percentage of your crop each year. Each year's crop usually didn't yield much more than what your family needed for subsistence, which is still the reality of most farmers today in the developing world. If the rains didn't come for a season, or you injured yourself and couldn't work for a time, you and your family were immediately put on the brink of starvation. So what would you do? Well, you would borrow money from your land owner. You had to. And it was not uncommon for land owners at that time to charge interest rates to the peasant class of up to 50%.

Now let's go back to the parable. How much did the first debtor owe? 800 gallons of olive oil, which was by the way about 7 ½ years' wages for a peasant farmer. And what did the middle

manager tell her? Make it 400 gallons—50% off. The middle manager erased the exorbitant interest rate on the debt. For the next debtor, the middle manager erased an interest rate of 20%. So the middle manager liberated a couple of peasant farmers from the crippling interest rates on their debt.

This is a good way to make friends, of course, and the middle manager was going to need friends. Once a middle manager was fired, he/she became subject not only to some serious downward mobility but also to public scorn and rejection. Middle managers were resented by the peasantry not only because they enforced these impossible debt payments, but also because with each transaction they charged the peasantry an additional “under-the-table” fee they kept for themselves. This man knew it was in his self-interest to make some friends and fast.

“I tell you, use worldly wealth to make friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” That’s exactly what the middle manager did; used his master’s worldly wealth to make friends for himself by giving them desperately needed no-interest loans. This middle manager’s own desperate situation motivated him to become good news for the poor. He thus put himself in right relationship to wealth by bailing out the interest rate of his master’s debtors.

But let’s be clear: this is a bailout of a very different kind from the bailout agreement being hammered out by Congressional leaders this weekend. It is not a bailout of wealthy companies, it is a bailout of poor peasants; it is not a bailout of bad debts, it is a bailout of impossible debts; it is not a bailout of debt from risky investment decisions by bankers because of greed (to quote John Gutfreund, former CEO of Salomon Brothers), it is a bailout of debt based on injustice that manipulated people and their labor to the point of starvation, even death.

What the middle manager was doing out of his own self-interest Jesus teaches we should practice as a habit: to turn an unjust system on its head by giving worldly wealth back to the poor. One NT scholar writes that this verse sets forth a striking reversal: Help the poor now in this world, and they will help you in the next. For God is the champion of the poor and gives to their friends God’s own welcome. As James Forbes, pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, says, “Nobody gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”

And then Luke expands the parable’s lesson by placing Jesus’ wisdom teachings on money directly after it. In verses 11 & 13: “If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous money, who will trust you with true riches? No servant can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and money.” The Greek word for “money” is “mammona”, meaning accumulation of wealth. In other words, that seductive pull to want more and more, which is what our culture endlessly promotes, advertises, and feeds to us. Our endless accumulation of stuff is good for the economy, we are told. The problem is that it can be toxic to our souls.

George Arthur Buttrick, NT scholar, writes that the words in verse 13: “you cannot serve both God and money” are as much a quiet statement of fact as if the word had been, “you cannot walk east and west at the same time.” They are not written as a threat, he writes; they are written as a matter of fact. You may be able to divide your time between two masters, he says, but you cannot divide your soul.

My first call as an ordained pastor was to a little church in Savoonga, Alaska, on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea. The people there are primarily Siberian Yupik Inuit or Eskimo, and

have lived on that island for thousands of years. And the people on the island have, for thousands and thousands of years, hunted the bowhead whale. And one day an elder in the village was sharing one of her favorite memories as a little girl. Her family caught a bowhead whale, cut it up on the beach, and then she got the privilege of delivering enormous slabs of whale meat and mungtuk (which is whale blubber—the primary staple in the Siberian Yupik diet) to everyone in the village.

And when she told me this story, I realized that the Siberian Yupiks got it right; this was the right use of wealth, to be distributed to all. Catching and killing a bowhead whale with a harpoon was and still is a tremendous feat. An average bowhead whale weighs 152 tons and is nearly 70 feet in length, and this is enormous wealth in Siberian Yupik culture. So why didn't they store it? Even without refrigeration you can store meat for years in the arctic without much decay. When a family got a whale, they could have established dominance in the village by hoarding it and charging others through labor or gifts. But such an economic system is still far removed from their way of life, from their thinking, from their consciousness. I often found myself truly humbled as their pastor. So many of their traditions and culture were so much closer to God's intention for the world than my own.

Again, George Arthur Buttrick: "Our job is not hoarding of wealth or fencing it for our own pleasure, but the proper circulation and use of it in God's sight. Our handling of the world's goods is stewardship—a direct dealing with God—from whom we come, to whom we go."

When we look to the Old Testament reading for today, this is same lesson is what the Israelites had to learn in the wilderness. Lutheran pastor and author Dan Erlander in his book *Manna and Mercy* calls the time the Israelites spent in the desert: "Going to wilderness school." The desert became God's classroom, the place where the people would learn how to live. What are the lessons of the wilderness school? 1) God gives manna for all and 2) hoarding manna stinks. The lesson of the wilderness, he writes, is that there is enough for everyone, and there is enough for everyone if we all take only what we need.

And so, I ask you to consider for yourself what your truth is: if you are experiencing a time of downward mobility when money is tight and you're wondering how you are going to get by, remember the lessons of the wilderness school, that God will provide for you. If you are in a time of upward mobility or if you have more than enough to meet your basic needs, remember the lessons of the wilderness school: that hoarding stinks, and ask yourself what you can give away so that someone else has enough?

All of this sounds so simple, really. And it is. But to put these teachings into practice is easier said than done, whether it is having faith that God will provide for you, or that God will provide the courage to give up the accumulation of things you don't need. I can tell you however that the effects of your lifestyle decisions are felt far beyond our own context; indeed, they impact the world.

A few years ago, Rick Ufford-Chase, former Moderator of the PCUSA, spoke at a Peacemaking Conference and in it he mapped out steps to take towards a truly secure and just world: 1) when a day's wage is enough to provide for families. 2) when my use of the world's resources is measured. 3) when my lifestyle will be balanced and sane so that my well-being is not built at the expense of someone else. 4) when we create community by cohesion not by coercion (with the art of negotiation and consensus-building).

Our small lifestyle changes to live more simply have global consequences.

Today we face a Global Hunger Crisis, with more than 100 million more people are currently at risk of experiencing extreme poverty and hunger. And the issues are so urgent and complex that our current Moderator, Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, is calling upon our denomination to participate in a church-wide fast once a month, on the first weekend of the month, for a full year, to study & pray for those who are suffering the most from a crumbling global economy. There will be reflections and information by the Presbyterian Hunger Program, and I encourage you to consider this opportunity for your own spiritual growth.

And although the causes are many and varied with this global hunger crisis, so much of the solution is about right-sizing ourselves and our needs, or becoming what I call "Manna People": people who, like the middle manager, redistribute wealth to the poor; Manna people who, like the Siberian Yupik, share their wealth the moment they receive it; Manna people who, like Rick Ufford-Chase, seek to live a lifestyle that is balanced and sane so that their well-being is not built at the expense of someone else; Manna people, who evangelize our culture with a Christ-like lifestyle rather than letting our culture evangelize us; Manna people, who know who their God is, so much so that they need not be attached to money, property, prestige, or anything else because they live in the radical faith that everything is God's and God will provide.

Let us be God's Manna People. Amen.