

Amos 8: 4-7  
I Timothy 2: 1-7  
Luke 16: 1-13

Managing Risk  
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Money has been in the news a lot lately. When isn't it in the news? There's the story about DHMC and the financial troubles there. There are the many elections coming up this fall, and many candidates. One of them is a business man who has made a fortune, and gone bankrupt, made more money, started a university, and has a lot of controversial dealings with large and small businesses and politicians. He argues that this was all legal. Another candidate is accused of trading influence for contributions to a non-profit foundation. And she says that she has done nothing illegal. But all of this leads the public to question their integrity. Any financial transaction, with implications for a relationship to the larger community, is a hot topic. It seems to hit people both in the wallet, where we are **very** sensitive, and in our sense of morality...where we are usually sensitive. So words from today's Gospel reading, like "squandering," "debt" and "manager" ring a bell. It seems that a lot of the Gospel is about economics. So maybe it's a good time for us to listen.

"Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth." Did you just hear Jesus say that? Are you sure? The disciples were usually baffled at Jesus' parables. Imagine them hearing this story...then asking Jesus to repeat himself, all the while shrugging at each other and wondering if it was a joke. By the way, I won't rule out the possibility that Jesus **did** have an ironic or comic streak.

The Parable of the Dishonest (or Shrewd) Manager is one of the most confusing passages in all of Scripture. You should see the knots scholars tie themselves into to explain it. So, if you're not quite sure what Jesus is trying to say here, you're in good company.

Amos is much easier. Not that the prophet is saying easy things, but he's straightforward. Addressing the rich urban upper class in Israel, he condemns them for trampling on the needy, and bringing the poor to ruin. He mocks their eagerness to get Sabbath worship over with so that they can go back to their greedy and dishonest business practices. "God sees you," Amos says. "In the long run, you won't get away with this." We hear this, and we understand. Whether you are rich or you are poor, you get the principle of being compassionate and fair. It is part of our Hebrew heritage: As the Psalmist says: "God raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap." We get the picture.

Jesus, on the other hand, tells us complicated stories. I have to admit that when I came upon this passage in today's lectionary readings, I considered trimming down or changing it to another reading altogether. Maybe I could leave the parable out and just read the last verse or two, about not serving two masters. Or I could always focus on that straightforward passage from Amos. Maybe you would have been happier if I did. But the parable of the dishonest manager is a puzzle, so I got caught up in it.

For the last few weeks we have been working our way through this section of Luke. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, hinting that it will be his final journey. Along the way, he talks to all kinds of people, and tells stories that may help his disciples once he's gone. He heals people on the Sabbath. He talks about the Kingdom of God, and the nature of God, how his followers should treat each other, and how they can live in a world of conflict. We've heard parables about banquets and feasts, about lost sheep and coins. In the chapter just before this one, there is a story about a prodigal son who squandered his inheritance, and then is reclaimed by his father. We seem to be on a roll, and it's all about forgiveness and inclusion. We are learning how to be disciples.

As he continues his journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus says more about what it means to be a disciple. Many in the crowd would have been poor, feeling put upon by the rich, so they might perk up at this story about a "rich man," hoping for more about how wicked and clueless the rich were. Ostensibly there are 2 "bad guys" in this story for the poor: the rich man and his manager. A manager negotiated and signed contracts and collected rent on his master's behalf; the master was usually an absentee landlord. If they were Jewish, they were not supposed to charge interest on loans, according to the law. But there were ways around this- loopholes, we might call them - though none of them benefited the poor debtor. The manager made his living by charging a huge percentage, up to half, for his share. This was common behavior for a tax collector as well: one of the reasons they were so hated. Never would a debtor want to have this manager or any other over to their homes to socialize.

We don't know exactly how the manager was squandering the rich man's property, but he is losing his lucrative job and has no other prospects. If we were speaking in the language of TV, the rich man would say, "You're fired!" Oddly, the manager's first concern, after losing his position, is that, unable to work and unwilling to beg, he won't be welcomed into people's homes. He is suddenly realizing how crucial community is to his survival. He will do anything to mend those broken ties. So he re-negotiates all the contracts, probably forfeiting any gain he might have earned. He will be penniless, but his master will get the goods he is owed, and the debtors will be grateful. Even the rich man congratulates him on his shrewd, though risky moves. These are both businessmen: we might say that they both understand the Art of the Deal. They understand that sometimes, drastic measures are prudent.

They understand, and Jesus seems to be saying, that resources can be used to build relationships or destroy them. They are translating financial behavior into relationship behavior. Are friends more important than money? Maybe it depends on how desperate you are.

A few years ago I heard an interesting example of this from our own time, though not from our own culture. Jennifer Fluri, a professor of geography and gender studies at Dartmouth, was giving a talk about everyday life and gender relations in Afghanistan. It seems that, for Westerners who go there to help out, what is difficult is understanding how power is measured. For instance, even though most everyone is very poor, an Afghan man might lend out money to ten other community members. He doesn't do this to charge interest and make more money - this is illegal under Islamic law. He does it because he will then be able to assemble those debtors whenever he wants. He controls their **time**. This influence is a building block of community. Of course, we may not like this, because it is open to abuse and exploitation. But perhaps those Afghan men have a clearer understanding of money, time, power and influence.

The parable of the dishonest steward and Jesus' comments about it are full of ambiguous words that make us question: is this really just about how to manage our financial accounts? A

couple of words make me wonder. The rich man is called master in our translation, but the word is actually “Lord.” And then there’s the word “debtor.” Luke is always lining up forgiveness of sin with forgiveness of debt. So, on behalf of the Lord, the steward forgives the debt of people, in order to build new relationships with them. And he is praised for this. Is this what the Lord wanted all along?

In our culture, we value individualism and privacy. We want to choose how we spend our money, our time. We like the democratic process that gives each of us a vote. We are bothered by the way that this steward reacts to being accused of mismanagement and threatened with job loss. He seems to be making a bigger mess of things, acting selfishly to save his own skin. But the result is that the debtors are much better off, and the steward has much better prospects. So we learn: how we use our resources is an indicator of priorities. That manager had new priorities: top on the list was the good will of his neighbors. When we spend **our** resources, financial and spiritual and social, does it reflect our priorities – or are we even clear about our priorities?

Jesus launches into a discourse about how much the “children of light” – I think that’s supposed to be us, spiritually enlightened as we are – can learn from the “children of this age.” He juggles the words faith (or trust) with the words unjust. At least the children of this age put their money where their mouths are. They see their priorities clearly. They are pragmatic. So, whether we are talking about money or forgiveness, whether we are talking about false balances or true riches, there is a logic to behaving well. Being faithful or trustworthy now means using every small occasion, every resource, for building community. Then the stakes will be raised, and the rewards will be even greater. We will be trusted with ever-greater opportunities for forgiveness and for welcoming. On the other hand, if we trade in petty injustice, if we use each small chance to withhold forgiveness, or to skimp on giving and hospitality, that will grow into its own burden, and the entire community loses.

The King James Version of this reading would have used that old term “Mammon of unrighteousness” for “dishonest wealth.” I like that word: “Mammon.” It’s a name, a personification of a concept, which seems appropriate somehow as we are dealing with the human condition. In the same way, the name of Satan was a personification of temptation, which all people experience at one time or another, as a kind of voice. The name of Mammon speaks of the living and harmful presence of greed in our lives. That simple (!) phrase, “No slave can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and Mammon,” gives us a vivid picture of our predicament. We have choices to make... an ever-present crisis, just as that steward was thrust into a crisis of decision making when confronted by his master.

This congregation, our church, sometimes has financial dealings with the outside world. It’s part of having this central place in the life of the Upper Valley community. We try to approach this with integrity: each small crisis of decision-making. Six years ago we negotiated with the Town with the possibility of selling our parsonage for use for offices and a police station. We did our best: we worked with the town to discern needs, to follow their process of community discussion and voting. It looked to some of us like a mutually beneficial arrangement. But we wanted to be good neighbors. And even though it is a disappointment to some that this plan did not come through, we can keep on with that attitude. We can seek the best for everyone involved in a prudent way that will pay off in the long run. It’s about more than dollars and cents. We need to trust God and to be trustworthy, so that we will be entrusted with true riches: a future of continued faithfulness and generosity.

We do this with a sense of both humility and purpose. I read a phrase from Martin Luther earlier this week: “We are mere beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.” Another hint that economy and spirituality go hand in hand. But whether we are beggars or rich men or stewards or debtors, we are all called by a loving God, and all called to give and receive.

So if we have resources by which to reach out and find the lost and rebuild community, then like the clever manager, we need to do everything we can. We need to take spiritual risks: forgiveness, comfort, prayer, teaching. We need to take some physical risks: feeding the hungry and thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, sheltering the homeless. And we may even need to take financial risks: trusting God enough to invest in an unknown future.

Jesus speaks about the children of this age, recognizing that not much happens in this world without the help of money. But, Jesus says, you can still work within that system and use it for God’s good purposes and glory. You cannot serve both God and the wealth. But we can serve God by shrewdly spending what resources we have to reach out to others. With this kind of risk management, we can see a future of common life that benefits all, the forgiving and forgiven. Thanks be to God. Amen.