Cedar Heights Community Presbyterian Church Rev. Johnny Janssen
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost—*The Truth of Abundance VS. the Myth of Scarcity*
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Old Testament Lesson—Proverbs 3:13-18

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 12:41-48

Peter said, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says to himself, "My master is delayed in coming,' and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

As we enter the month of November—a time when our focus becomes naming who and what we're grateful for—I'll be honest: I'm not feeling super grateful for the parable from Luke this morning (not at first anyway).

Of course there's a lot of great wisdom here—wonderful lessons we can take from all the parables of Christ. But the wisdom in this parable is wrapped up in a lot of disturbing imagery. By today's standards, it is gross—disgusting.

And yet, as I've said time and time again…It isn't good to impose our modern, twenty-first century worldview onto ancient peoples—tempted as we might be—especially when it comes to things like slavery and the horrors associated with it.

For those of us living with the legacy of the North Atlantic Slave Trade (going all the way back to 1619), this is really challenging. After all, the system of American chattel slavery wasn't that long ago. Right? It's the "original sin" of the United States and other countries as well.

And, as we know, the injustice of slavery didn't evaporate with Lincoln's proclamation. After all, the United States had agreed long ago to view the enslaved as "three-fifths" of a person—subhuman.

Thankfully, of course, Lincoln's proclamation led to federal reparations after the Civil War…Right? It's true. It did! Federal reparations were given…to many white slaveowners to compensate them for their losses.

That kind of mentality (no surprise, I guess) leads to Jim Crow and legal segregation—all of which leads to the mangled platter of injustices that linger today.

This is all to say you'd be forgiven for having some difficulty holding back perceptions of modern, American slavery when we read about ancient slavery in Scripture. It's hard, right? But it's important to try—important to not conflate or confuse the two systems.

In the Jewish culture of Jesus's day, for example, whether a person was enslaved wasn't largely based on their appearance or phenotype. Instead, many were taken as slaves as spoils of war. You could also be made a slave for financial reasons: failing to pay your debts comes to mind.

It's worth noting too, that Jewish Law forbade a person to remain a slave forever. Jesus knew this, of course. He makes reference to the "year of the Lord's favor"—to the Jubilee—several times during his ministry.

No worries if you're a bit fuzzy on the Jubilee. You can think of the Jubilee as a kind of "super-Sabbath." It came around every fifty years and when it did, the Law of Moses commanded that every debt be forgiven—no matter how far along someone was with paying back what they owed. Clean slates for everyone.

And the Law meant *everyone*—including slaves. In fact, in Jewish society, it was irrelevant how you became a slave. When the year of Jubilee came, every slave gained their freedom—which makes sense when you remember Jesus's ancestors were liberated from the forced labor of Egypt and the brutality of Pharoah. Right? They were once slaves themselves.

So it's no surprise that their God—the God who set them free—would demand regular liberation from them. They would never be allowed to keep peoples enslaved for generations upon generations like they were. No: radical grace—freedom and forgiveness would always be the end of everyone's story.

Now, obviously other cultures—like the Romans of Jesus's day—would have different laws and customs. But, so far as decisions were made by the Jews only, the Jubilee would come around eventually—setting everyone free from bondage and debt.

Mind you: In Luke's gospel (right before this parable), Jesus had *just* taught his disciples how to pray. So when he says, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven everyone indebted to us," he's really bringing the Jubilee into everyday life—not something that just comes around every fifty years.

Forgiveness of sin and debt isn't reserved just for the future—for the "year of the Lord's favor." No, Christ brings it into the present—imagining a world where every year could be a Jubilee!

From where I'm standing, parables like this one hit much differently in the context of Jubilee and debt forgiveness. I mean, those things are the reason Jesus had come. It's why he's here! He tells us this—clear as day—as he kicks off his ministry in Luke…

Christ announced, "I've come to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

When Jesus says this, I don't hear him saying freedom is waiting for you in the future. I think, by his very presence, he meant freedom has come *now*. Jubilee is here; and it is to be the status quo from now on.

And still—even with all that context and background—it's still a very troubling story (to say the least). I keep thinking, "Surely Jesus could've made the same point with a parable that didn't make us cringe." Right?

I mean, as far as parables go, the point of this one's pretty clear. It builds and builds until Jesus makes this familiar proclamation: *From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.*

There it is. That's the core teaching Jesus wants to get across. So did we really need all that violence to say that? Well, I'm afraid we can't answer that.

What I can say with certainty is that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person—with a cultural context who lived during a specific time and place. Jesus, like us all, was a product of the ancient, near Eastern world—a world where slavery was normal and part of the fabric of society.

And, let's not forget, the same should be said about Luke, the author of the gospel. In fact, every author that had a hand in writing the Bible was a product of their time. So it is with all of us, today.

But, hear this my friends: Like our Lord and Savior, we are called to name the evils of the world so they cannot hide. Like Christ, we're called to challenge assumptions, norms, and cultural conventions. Just like Jesus, we don't have to accept the status quo—we can create and maintain a better one—one built on justice and equity.

Though we live in a vastly different world than Jesus did, I think there would still be a lot he would recognize if he were walking our streets today.

You see: the world wants us to believe that, to achieve "success," I should look out for numero uno. The world wants us to believe in a zero-sum game—to believe in winners and losers—haves and have-nots—that my success means your failure.

The world wants us to accept a status quo that makes the rich richer and puts the poor in their place—wants us to believe that the "least of these" deserve it—that they didn't work hard enough—that time and generosity are wasted on them—that these persons aren't as valuable, aren't worth loving—that society needs a "healthy" amount on the bottom fighting for scraps to support the economic pyramid.

So many lies we tell ourselves—lies that bring new life into the daily rat race.

But perhaps the biggest lie of all—the one the world wants us to desperately hold on to—is that there just isn't enough to go around—that we have to cling to our piece of the pie with every fiber of our being. We just have to accept the "reality" of poor neighborhoods, developing nations, and food deserts.

Siblings in Christ: We have been fed the myth of scarcity for so long that we've started to accept it as gospel—as a given. One of our church's confessions, *A Brief Statement of Faith*, says we "accept lies as truth."

It's time we see the myth of scarcity for what it is: a terrible, defeatist lie. As Scripture shows us throughout its pages, the truth is that God made an abundant world that we're called to take care of. The truth is that no one has more intrinsic worth than another. No, God loves everyone with a stubborn, sacrificial love.

The truth is that we've become slaves to consumerism and hyper-capitalism—so much so that we've become willfully ignorant of God's abundance. We refuse to acknowledge the blessings we're meant to share.

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

What have we been given? What are we entrusted with?

We have God's grace. We have the love of Christ. And we know the truth—that we live in a world with plenty to go around. To accept otherwise makes a mockery of God's Creation.

There's no reason for any child of God to go without—no reason for anyone to be in need. For God the Liberator, and Christ the Liberator made flesh, has set us free from all those comfortable lies.

The good news of the gospel is that we're no longer enslaved to the myth of scarcity! The good news is we know the truth; and the Truth has set us free.

We are free.

Amen.