

Two Economies

Luke 16:1-13

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*If we do not serve what coheres and endures, we serve what disintegrates and destroys.*

-Wendell Berry

The parable of the shrewd manager is usually considered the most difficult of all Jesus' parables to preach on. So, this morning I want us to work through it taking our time so we can reflect on it.

Let's begin with a simple retelling of the parable as we have it. Sam Wells, the vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London, says it is helpful to think of this parable in scenes. Scene One gives us a very wealthy man and his manager who has also become wealthy using the owner's assets as his own. Scene Two: The owner discovers what has been happening and brings him in and promptly fires him. In Scene Three the manager gets smart. Before he clears out his office, he gets a chance to visit with his boss's clients to settle all their accounts and writes off their debts to the owner. The manager knows it is too late to make money for himself, but it's not too late to build social capital. He starts turning debtors into friends, who will be glad to see him even when he's without a job. In Scene Four, the owner shows up and rather than chastising the manager or having him arrested, he says, "I'm impressed. You have used your brains to come up with an answer different from anything I imagined, simply by being generous and building

relationships. You realized generosity and relationships are a better investment than what I do.”

This is an interesting story. And a difficult one. Is Jesus commending dishonesty? Plus, there is the commendation from the owner, which raises more questions. The owner, however, is not going to commend his manager for being dishonest – especially, at his own expense. Instead, the owner commends him for his shrewdness, shrewdness in the service of building relationships of generosity. Then Jesus commends this same kind of shrewdness for children of light. In other words, for those of us who follow him as disciples.

Jesus goes on to say that no one can serve two masters... You can't serve both God and Mammon. Mammon is an old Aramaic word meaning wealth or money or greed. Jesus is recorded as saying the same thing about not serving God and wealth in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:19-21).

Let me remind you that the Bible has a whole lot to say about money, greed, economics, wealth, and poverty. A whole lot. It is one of the most central themes in all of Scripture. It pervades the Old Testament, and scholars say that the prophets of old, pronounced sin and the judgement of God upon two things more than any other: idolatry and wealth, and most of the time, the two were connected.

In the New Testament, there are more than five hundred verses of direct teaching on economics. That is one out of every sixteen verses, and we're not even including the indirect teachings on wealth and poverty through parables and actions by Jesus and the apostles. Jim Wallis says that Jesus talked more about wealth and poverty than almost any other subject, including heaven and hell, sex

and sexual morality, the law, or violence. Wallis goes on to say that one out of every ten verses in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is about the rich and the poor. Here, in Luke, it is one out of every seven verses. Over in the little book of James it is one out of five. All of this is to say the subject of serving God or Mammon is no casual concern in the Bible. It is overwhelming in verse after verse (see Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, p. 57-58). Don't you think it is interesting how little is ever said about it in our White American churches?

So, let's hear this parable a second time with some of these larger economic questions in mind. Scene One shows us the owner, he is wealthy and has all the power, and therefore the parable begins with him. Everyone else matters according to how they relate to him. He has a manager, which is a pretty good position to have because he gets to spend someone else's money as if it were his own. Scene Two gives us a glimpse of the downside to this economy. The owner is told, maybe it's whispered in his ear while in the elevator, or perhaps it's in a meeting, or over dinner and drinks at the club, but the owner is told the manager is blowing money and making bad business decisions. Since he has all the power, and without further investigation or even hearing the manager's side, the owner fires the manager. No unemployment package. Nothing. Scene Three: The manager says, "Man, oh man, I'm in a tight spot and I'd better think outside the box. I hear tell of a different kind of economics. Maybe I need to look into that."

In the ancient world, Aristotle talked about two kinds of economics: *oikonomia* and *chrematistics*. The first is where we get our word economy and means "household management," in other words, working and using money to pay the bills, feed the family, and maintain a household. The second word has to do with making money, specifically accumulating wealth in the form of money, for

the sake of making a profit. Using these two distinctions, think about the manager in the parable of living in the world of making a profit, and because he's fired, he starts looking into a different economy: household management – getting one's house in order.

Wendell Berry has a classic essay called “Two Economies,” in which he says we live in and assume that the only economy – capitalism, making a profit. He calls it the “small economy.” But Berry says there is another economy that is bigger and more encompassing, one we rarely notice, called “the Great Economy.” It operates differently from the first. The Great Economy is about cooperation, making connections, and building community, including wider creation, and including future generations, while the smaller capitalist economy is about individuals and competition. It is about disconnection because in this economy you never let relationships stand in the way of making a profit, and you don't let future generations stand in the way of making a profit today. The small economy, or what I call “short-sighted” economics, looks inward while the Great Economy looks outward at each other and to the wider world. The Great Economy includes while the other excludes. It is expansive while the other is restrictive. The Great Economy shares while the small economy grasps and hoards. Berry famously said, “If we do not serve what coheres and endures, we serve what disintegrates and destroys” (see Wendell Berry, *What Matters?: Economics for a Renewed Commonwealth*, pp. 115-138).

Perhaps the manager in our parable decided to join what coheres and endures since he was kicked out of what disintegrates and destroys?

Economist Herman Daly also says there are two economies and calls one steady-state economics in contrast to neo-classical economics. Steady-state economics says community, sustainability, and the environment must be central. For example, if we're drilling for oil, besides the cost of drilling and the profit that comes from producing the oil, steady-state economics says we must also figure the cost to the environment. We must factor in depletion of the oil, but also pollution and toxic waste, the economics of what burning fossil fuels is doing to the air, and soil, and water, and the economics of fossil fuels and climate change. Plus, we need figure these economics over a long period of time. Daly says we must do economics so that what and how we extract resources does not exceed how those resources are sustained over multi-generations. We can't grow a crop and use up the soil fertility and then move on to another farm, as farmers did a hundred years ago. We must include the costs of caring for the soil and caring for the environment and include future generations in our economic planning. I think it is interesting that Daly chose theologian John Cobb to write with him one of his most important books, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Beacon Pr., 1994).

Biblical theologian Ched Myers is another who says there are two economies. He calls one the economy of *mammon* and the other the economy of *manna*, which gets us back more specifically to our parable. Where we left our manager, he was figuring out how to put his house in order, and since he's lost his job and his shirt in a cutthroat economy, he says in v. 4, "I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people will *welcome me into their homes*." This is no unimportant detail for Jesus repeats it for emphasis at the end of

his telling of the parable (16:9). In other words, when my economy hits a dead-end, maybe it's time to invest in another way of doing economics.

In connection with this parable, as I said earlier, Jesus uses the term mammon, or wealth. Sam Wells calls it the economy of scarcity. It assumes there is not enough to go around and not enough to share, so I must use my energy, and my wits to make sure I make all I can and hold onto it. Everyone else is on their own.

There is also the economy of manna, of abundance. Remember that manna is the food God gave to the Hebrew people while crossing the wilderness. There was always enough. If you tried to grasp and hoard, it would rot. But if you gathered enough for you and your family, there was plenty. If you gathered enough for people who were unable to get it on their own, there was plenty. Manna is for everybody, and it is received and shared because it is a gift of God. It is grace.

Sam Wells says this is what happens in Scene Three of the parable. The manager gives up trying to squeeze people for a living and starts building relationships instead. He realizes that community is more lasting and enduring and important than making a profit. He moves from mammon to manna, from an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance. He discovers an economy of grace. He enters the Great Economy.

So, when Scene Four comes around the owner, who probably became the owner by recognizing a good thing when he saw it, says, “You’re living in a larger economy, an abundant kind of living that’s better than mine. I need to learn from you.”

So how would you read this parable if you were the manager? You’re doing your thing, making money but suddenly there is a day of reckoning. Perhaps you get laid off, you get fired, or maybe there is a death in your family of someone very close. Maybe the doctor comes in and says, “I’m sorry. It’s cancer.” Or perhaps there is a hurricane which wipes out your job and maybe your home, as well. Or maybe it is climate change that necessitates something even more drastic like picking up and moving away without anything or anywhere to go.

A few decades ago, we learned in politics the phrase, “it’s the economy, stupid.” And this story tells us that when the day of reckoning comes, it’s the economy, stupid.

But which economy? Mammon? The short-sighted economy of me and mine and only includes people just like me? That is interested in today’s quick profit? That’s the economy of scarcity and grasping and hoarding, competition, and anxiety, and building walls and getting guns.

Or are you going to live in the Great Economy? Where wealth is used to nurture and grow relationships and community, care for the Earth and care for

future generations of this Earth. Where it's not about "me" but about "we" and together we invest in the common good of public schools and a city that serves everyone, including a first-rate fire department. This is the Great Economy of God, of manna, where we share so everyone has enough, where we work together to heal people from diseases, where we build just relationships, and free people from despair.

When Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), he was not talking about individuals living life with zest and exuberance. He was talking about a shared life full of love and grace, nurturing each other, and though we might not end up with a lot of money, when hard times come, we'll have a remarkable community of caring friendships.

Yesterday morning, around 20 of you got together at Steve and Kay Chism's to help them. You sawed up a couple of downed trees, split logs, cut up limbs and brush, dragged them to the burn-pile where you burned the debris. In the meantime, the kids ran and played in the woods. Then you all gathered for a big dinner. It was hard work, but it was good work. And though I was home trying to make sense of steady-state economics and writing this sermon, the reports I received said it was a very good day. Not only was the work accomplished but life was shared and enjoyed, and once more, you were reminded what life in church is about.

That's a picture of what the economy of manna, the Great Economy, is all about. It's the economy worth investing in.



In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.

\*Thanks to Sam Wells and his *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a  
Pluralistic Culture*, pp. 167-172, for the interpretation of the parable.