

From Capital to Community

Colossians 1:15-20; 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

What's your favorite tree? Or your most memorable tree? Was there a favorite tree of your childhood? Perhaps a tree in which you built a tree-house or had a swing or one under its shade you sat and read?

Of course, I've told stories about my most memorable tree: the "Talking Tree" beside the porch of my grandparents' house where we used sit for hours telling stories, drinking iced tea, and telling more stories. It was a big old pecan tree that leaned because of the many years of my grandfather sitting with his feet propped up on its trunk.

Trees have stories to tell us, stories of when we sat in them or played under them, but they also have stories to tell of how we might live together in community. As Richard Powers says in the Prologue of his novel *The Overstory*, "The pine she leans against says: 'Listen. There's something you need to hear.'"

In his best-selling non-fiction book, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, scientist Peter Wohlleben, talks about the interdependence of trees and how trees of the same species in the same stand "are

connected to each other through their root systems. It appears that nutrient exchange and helping neighbors in times of need is the rule, and this leads to the conclusion that forests are superorganisms with interconnections much like ant colonies” (p. 3). He goes on, “There are advantages to working together. A tree is not a forest. On its own a tree cannot establish a consistent local climate. It is at the mercy of wind and weather. But together, many trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores a great deal of water, and generates a great deal of humidity. And in this protected environment, trees can live to be very old. To get to this point, the community must remain intact no matter what. If every tree were looking out only for itself, then quite a few of them would never reach old age” (p. 4).

Over these next few months I’m hoping we will explore and reflect and learn from trees, learn from one another, learn from other sources, and most of all, learn from Scripture how we might better be *rooted in Christ, grounded in community*. It is why we are inviting you to read Bill McKibben’s *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. During our adult Sunday School hour we’ll be reading McKibben alongside Scripture, all in an effort to deepen our roots in Christ and better ground our lives in community with each other. Because, as McKibben makes clear, (and I’m quoting Benjamin Franklin) “if we don’t hang together, we will most assuredly hang separately.” For McKibben and for me, and for Scripture, we must learn to live together in community and help show Nacogdoches how to be a community, in order to face the coming storms of the future. The call is to be interconnected with God, with each other, and with all of Creation – to learn to live in harmony and peace/justice/shalom.

The Apostle Paul tells us in our reading this morning from Colossians that “In Christ all things cohere” or “all things hold together” (1:17). My working thesis is that God’s plan has been from the beginning for all things to hold together. Everything is interconnected and interdependent. This is how God created the world.

But we know from Scripture and experience that God’s original interconnectedness is in shreds. As John Donne put it, “’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone” (from “An Anatomy of the World”). For Donne everything and everyone thinks we’re on our own and that each of us is his or her own person. We call it self-interest. The Bible calls it Sin.

Yet, the gospel is that in Christ there is coherence. Our divided and separated, disintegrating, falling apart world is being redeemed, made whole and healed. In Christ, we are reconnected and reconciled with all God wants. We are reintegrated into the whole that is centered in Christ. In Christ, we move from self-interest to the interest of each other and all Creation. We become “other-centered.” In other words, we begin to learn what the trees have long known: that we can care for each other.

This raises the questions of what this kind of coherence and interconnection might look like in the world around us? What would it look like for Nacogdoches to practice being a coherent community instead of a gathering of incoherent individuals? What would a local economy built upon taking care of each other look like instead of one that assumes that self-interest is the center of it all?

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson from Luke 16 and what is usually called the Parable of the Unjust Steward/Dishonest Manager. I'd like to challenge you to find another name for this manager in this story. He's "dishonest" only if we read this from the perspective of the dominant economy of capitalism.

This is a difficult parable mainly because we tend to think in terms of one economy – capitalism. But Jesus is talking about two different economies.

In Jesus' day, there was a dominant economy of patronage that underscored the hierarchical social structures of the Roman Empire. Sort of like medieval feudalism in which underlings gave their allegiance and service and work for the owner or the patron, while the patron made sure those lower down on his ladder had their needs met.

At the same time, there was an older economy, especially in the villages and rural areas that was built upon and integral with community, family, tribes, and kinship. This was a communal economy going back to Deuteronomy and Leviticus and then the Prophets. With the coming of Rome, these two economies were in conflict nevertheless; if you wanted a moneymaking business you had to join the imperial Roman economy. The rub is that not everyone was in a moneymaking business. Some people going back to the Old Testament thought they were in the caring for each other business.

The parable begins with the matter-of-fact acknowledgement of an absentee landlord/CEO who ran the corporation. He had a manager working for him and calls him in and says, "I've been looking at the books and we have found some discrepancies. You've been squandering the company's assets." It is very

interesting that the word used here is translated “squandering” or “wasting” because the same word can also be translated “scattering” like scattering seed. Mary uses the same word back in her Magnificat in Luke 1 when she sings about the proud being scattered and the “mighty put down from their thrones” (Luke 1:51-52). The only other place it is translated as “squandering” is in the previous chapter and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:13). So, it is likely that the manager has been scattering money or redistributing some of the possessions under his control, which makes sense, because this is exactly what he is about to do in the rest of the story.

So the CEO says, “The shareholders have decided that we need to downsize and become more efficient in order to maximize the profit margin. You’ve got two weeks” (16:1-2).

The middle management guy says to himself, “What am I going to do? When I’m let go I won’t be able to find another job. I can’t dig ditches and I can’t beg. Either way will kill me. My reputation will be finished and I’ll starve” (16:3).

In verse 4 he says, “I’ve got to do something so that after my two weeks are up I’ll be welcomed into people’s homes.” In other words, “If I’m going to survive I need to leave this patronage system and go over to the old economy based upon relationships and community. In the old economy people take care of one another. In this imperial economy it’s dog-eat-dog.”

The rest of the parable shows the manager’s subversive initiative. In the short time between his firing and its public announcement, he calls in his clients one by one and gives them a deal. He writes off their debt for much less of what

they actually owe – sort of a Jubilee or sabbatical moment (Lev. 25:36-38; Deut. 15:1-11) where people are released from debt every seventh year and especially every 50th year.

The CEO shows up and instead of having his manager arrested, he commends him for his cleverness, his shrewdness. I wonder if the CEO commends him because instead of being the town scoundrel and hated CEO of the big company outside of town. The CEO has become the town hero. As far as everyone knows, the CEO ordered all of the debt forgiveness. Everyone loves him. To save face, he can't stand up and tell the truth about what happened. Begrudgingly, the CEO admits that the manager has outsmarted him. Nevertheless, the manager is still fired – but now he is in the hands of the very villagers who benefited from his debt-restructuring.

Jesus concludes the parable saying, “For the children of this age are more shrewd than the children of light in dealing with their own generation” (16:8b). Or, “As long as we're living in the times we're in, we had better be smart in order to survive.” In this particular case, the manager has thrown his lot in with the rest of the peasants in town who owed money to the corporation. He helped them in order to help himself while he also gave them debt relief. At the same time, he was acting out the old economics found back in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15.

Jesus' continues (verses 9-13) with remarks about the dominant system of “mammon” or as the NRSV translates it, “wealth.” In v. 9 he says that though this mammon system is what we have to work with for now, it is unsustainable. Use it as best as you can, to build relationships of hospitality because the day is coming when all we'll have will be our “eternal tents.” When Jesus refers to “eternal tents”

it is an allusion to the old core memory of the people living in tents coming out of the Exodus and relying on God's manna.

Here is a parable about learning to use capital on behalf of community. It is a risky move to make because we can easily be ensnared into the thinking the imperial system of capital is the only economic system around. Jesus ends with this clear word: the truth is these two systems are ultimately incompatible. "You cannot serve God and mammon" (16:13). Or as Wendell Berry says, "If we do not serve what coheres and endures, we serve what disintegrates and destroys" (from the essay, "Two Economies").

So, how might we use money to build community and interconnection? For example, one of the things I'd like to see our churches in town do is come together and raise enough money to work with a local credit union or lender to out-compete the predatory loan businesses that are destroying so many people and families. These predatory lenders make payday loans or car title loans at 400% or 500% interest! Talk about disintegration and destruction! Instead, we could be making short-term, small loans at a just and fair rate. Our friends in Shreveport at Church for the Highlands, with whom we go to Youth Camp, do this and perhaps we can get a carload to go over and see what they're doing?

Some of this stuff we have long known. We try to support fair-trade which helps support local, small-time growers instead of big corporations. We continue to participate and support our wonderful farmers' market which builds community rather than buying at the big-box stores or online, both of which suck money out of our community. And we want to continue asking how we can generate and support such things as community-supported farms like Appleby Community Farm but

beyond that, how can we help locally owned businesses, like restaurants, use locally grown food? The Nacogdoches County Community Collaborative (headed by our own Steve Cooper) is asking some of these very same questions and there is a group coming out of Nacogdoches Helping Other People Eat (HOPE) seeking to renew the neighborhood around HOPE's food pantry. Or there is the example of our own Habitat for Humanity, which seeks to form local partnerships (like with our own Nina Malone) to provide affordable housing. Furthermore, we want to learn to ask and imagine the many ways local businesses can invest in local community – how to pay workers a just and living wage, for example? We do this because our workers are our neighbors – because their kids and our kids go to school together and play school sports together or are in Scouts together or maybe even in church together.

Our friend, Wen Stephenson, the writer living in Boston, who has been here and preached, and also is the author of *What We're Fighting For Now is Each Other: Dispatches From the Front Lines of Climate Justice* (Beacon Pr. 2015), recently interviewed writer Amitav Ghosh about his new novel *Gun Island*, in which climate disruption is a major part. Ghosh, who is Indian but lives in Brooklyn, said in this context of climate change, “We have to look beyond, we have to try to find something else. And I suppose I part company with others who write about climate and so on. They have the tools to speculate about the future; they know about science especially, that kind of thing. I don't. I know about the past. And I know about the present. So I can only use what I have.”

Wen later responds, “There's this important Latin quotation in the book: *Unde origo inde salus*. “From the origin, salvation comes.” Of course, it's

inscribed in a mosaic in the nave of an iconic Catholic church, Santa Maria della Salute, in Venice.”

And Ghosh says, “Elon Musk believes that our salvation will come from the future. I don’t think so. I think, if there is going to be any salvation, it’s going to come from history...” (from Wen Stephenson interview “Divining Comedy” in Baffler, Sept. 5, 2019).

Today, we have been looking to the past, to our origin, for our salvation. We look to Jesus. We look at what the Apostle Paul says and we’re even learning from trees. In Jesus Christ, all things cohere – that’s the origin; that’s the future. And that’s with whom I want to be.

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