

What Shall We Do?
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Luke 16:1-13

“The crowds asked him...the tax collectors asked him...soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’” “The rich man thought to himself, ‘What should I do...?’” “Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do...?’”

The manager is clearly a man caught in the middle. Before he was called to the front office and fired on the basis of a nasty rumor, he considered himself lucky not only to have a job (given the economy), but doubly fortunate to have a job that kept him a rung above the debt-ridden peasants he was paid to harass. Put another way, the man was simply a cog in an unjust social order, an order in which the rich land owners grew richer, the laborers grew poorer and those in middle management did anything necessary to keep their jobs. Admittedly over the years, because the minimum wage he was paid did not begin to cover his basic expenses, this manager had found ways to subvert the system whenever possible. In the bigger scheme of things, he often thought to himself, what did it really matter that he had hidden a bottle of olive oil or handful of wheat now and again in his bag? The accounting discrepancy was usually blamed on the slaves—a fact that may have caused him to toss and turn at night until he remembered his children sheltered and asleep with full bellies. As long as his little dishonesty did not affect the master’s bottom line, all was well.

Well, that is, until the day when his inconsequential pilfering became the substance of a rumor among the slaves and the reason he was about to be out of a job. Now the middle he was caught in shifted. Instead of negotiating expectations and complaints, this middle manager was about to be a victim of both the peasants below him and the master above him. Likely the rumor of his dishonesty could be traced to the workers whose everyday ways of subverting the system, according to social scientist James Scott, included “foot dragging, dissimulation, false

compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson [and] sabotage.” Even if the manager were not fired, they reasoned, at least he would be less likely to pilfer from them in the future. So once the rumor is leaked to the master, the question the master asks the manager is no question at all but an indictment: “What is this that I am hearing about you?” The manager speaks not a word in his own defense.

God knows, no matter our social status, we often think of ourselves as persons caught in the middle. The middle is the place where we are running like mad just in order to stay in place or where we are caught between the expectations of the powers that be above us and the complaints of the poor beneath us or where we must negotiate competing claims from every direction on our time, our emotions, our resources, our loyalties. The middle is therefore a place where we spend an enormous amount of energy trying to control the small things we can control—all the while denying or denouncing or defying our essential vulnerability to all that is beyond our control.

Always at issue in the middle is our control of the future and often we think our means of controlling the future, according to Luke, has something to do with what the older translations of the Bible called mammon, the Semitic word for “that in which one fully trusts.” The crisis that caused the manager to recalculate his immediate options was a crisis concerning mammon which the new revised translation renders as wealth. “What will I do,” he asks, “now that my master is taking the position away from me?” How will I provide for myself, my family, my future? His options were limited: the indignity of digging—joining the ranks of the debt-ridden manual laborers after lording it over them for so long—or the shame of begging—becoming one of the pitiable figures whom the manager had looked down upon on his way to the office every day for years. There was, however, a third option. This clever manager could figure out how to work the

system as he never had before.

Essentially he comes up with a win-win-win scheme that even Jesus had to admire. To reset the parable in a time and situation closer to home, imagine a loan officer writing subprime mortgage agreements in 2008, just before the crash, who had not met his numbers and was in line to be fired. “What will I do?” he asks himself and decides, while he still has his laptop and his credentials, to contact the families who are set to receive foreclosure notices. Instead of foreclosing on their loans, he sends out hundreds, even thousands of official looking documents that forgive enough of the interest on the mortgage so that the new mortgage equals the collapsed value of their homes. Suddenly across the land a cheer goes up, the CEO of the loan officer’s company is lauded in the media for his compassion, the housing market is saved from its freefall and the manager is called into the front office where the CEO of the bank finds himself in the same position as the master in Jesus’ parable. In effect, his hands have been tied, the power has shifted, a modicum of justice has been realized and the social order has momentarily been upended. Now the question of what to do belongs to the master whose usury was a clear violation of the Torah.

According to William Herzog, “The master can either accept the praise of the peasants and retain the steward or cancel the renegotiated contracts and make a martyr of the steward.” While we do not know the immediate outcome of his scheme, we do know that the master commended the manager for his shrewdness. Maybe he even thought to himself that it would be better to have this fellow working for him rather than against him. As Herzog characterizes the transformation, whereas at the beginning of the parable “masters distrust stewards; peasants hate stewards; stewards cheat both tenants and masters...by means of [the manager’s] outrageous actions, the steward manages to reverse all of these [social] scripts so that, at the close of the

parable, peasants are praising the master, the master commends the steward, and the steward has relieved the burden on the peasants and kept his job.” It “looks almost like a piece of the kingdom of heaven,” Karl Barth exclaimed in a sermon on this text; “a glimpse for the debtors of another order, one in which forgiveness of debt would be more than a petition in a prayer,” Herzog says. Yet notice, as well, the master’s public vulnerability, the peasants’ paradoxical increase of dependence on the master’s graciousness and the new complexity of the steward’s relationship to both going forward: all unintended consequences of the steward’s shrewd actions that let us glimpse the kingdom proclaimed by the one telling the story. Amen!

Not so fast, says Luke as he appends the parable with a confusing set of Jesus’ sayings about wealth, leaving us to ask in the midst of whatever middle we find ourselves straddling at this moment in our lives, “What shall we do in response to this strange parable?” Be as shrewd as the manager but for all the right reasons? Give the big bucks you have been able to make by working a corrupt social order to the poor, die penniless and be welcomed into the eternal tents that are another word for God? Keep on keeping on, be faithful in the little things so that, when the time comes, you will also be faithful in the big things? Handle dishonest wealth as though it belonged to God so that one day you will be trusted with true riches? To tell the truth, the only unambiguous statement is the last: You cannot serve God and mammon, you cannot serve God and, at the same time, put all your trust in making money. What shall we do?

I think it not by chance in Luke’s Gospel that the manager in this parable is not the first to wonder out loud about what he should do nor is he the last. It is also not a coincidence that every time the question is raised, the response has to do with mammon—with the possessions, the money the means we fully trust instead of God. In Luke’s third chapter, John’s preaching on repentance causes the crowds and the tax collectors and the soldiers to ask him what they should

do. John tells the crowds, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” To the tax collectors he says, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” and to the soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” Knowing that they trust more fully in these things than in God, John counsels them to let go.

Likewise, the rich landowner in Luke’s twelfth asks “What should I do?” because his land has produced more than he can store in his present barns. Thinking his problem is a problem of space, he builds more barns, stores all his stuff, thereby securing his future and begins to kick up his heels. Think again, God says, for this night your life is demanded of you. The parable puts flesh on the admonition Jesus had laid on a crowd of thousands just moments before: “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

The last time the question is asked, we are at the beginning of the Luke’s Book of Acts. Peter has just proclaimed the gospel to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. In response, they ask Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter says to them, “Repent, and be baptized.” About three thousand were. Then they sold their possessions and goods, according to Luke, and distributed the proceeds to all, as many as had need. That is to say, they began to live as those who trusted fully in God.

In story after story, I think Luke is trying to free us from being caught in the middle between God and mammon, between the One who has given us this good gift of life, the one whose providence, whose providing would uphold, direct, govern and guide us if we would let him and every other thing we trust. Though this difficult parable may seem like the outlier, when you think the energy, intelligence, imagination and self-love the steward spent on conniving to

secure his future financially, I think the sayings that follow invite us to imagine instead the story of a steward whose energy, intelligence, imagination and love were spent on God.

God has given us an imagination for just such a steward in Jesus Christ. What shall we do but follow him? How different would our lives be if we put all of our trust in him? What would change about the order of our days and the social order of our world if our energy, intelligence, imagination and love no longer served the things we are desperate to have and hold in order to secure our future but served the God who is love alone? What would our future look like if we were to repent of these lives caught in the middle of so many things in order that the one true thing might have center place? These are not pious questions to ask of a Sunday morning, but questions the gospel puts to any here who are running like mad just in order to stay in place, to all of us who are exhausted negotiating competing claims from every direction on our time, our emotions, our resources, our loyalties. Jesus told this story to his disciples who had left everything in life to follow him. What shall we do? Perhaps when we lie to die and finally realize we cannot take it with us, the friends we have made by means of mammon will take us in to tent eternally with the God who tents with us in Jesus Christ. Or maybe it is that the One who has already forgiven our debts has prepared a place for us. Thanks be to God. Now amen!