

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (c)
Amos 8:4-7 1 Timothy 2:1-7 Luke 16:1-13
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
September 18, 2022 [Traditional]

Sometimes getting fired can be the best thing that happens to a person. One of my relatives has a sales position in a very volatile tech industry. Three times he's lost his job during downturns. These were major disruptions in his family's life. It was horrible. Stressful and humiliating. But every time, in his case, the next job turned out to be a big step up—a wonderful change. In fact, he looks back on some of his old jobs and says “thank God I don't have to work for that boss, in that environment, anymore.” Of course getting fired doesn't always turn out well. But sometimes, in this broken world it can lead to wonderful new possibilities.

Today Jesus shares this deep, rich, and somewhat confusing parable about the manager who gets fired from his job. It can be confusing because the main character is kind of shady to begin with, and even more confusingly, he ends up getting congratulated for double dealing. But helpfully, Jesus makes a very strong distinction in the gospel between what he calls the “children of this age,” and the “children of light.” Right away, we know that we don't have to identify ourselves directly with the characters in this parable. The shady manager and his boss are not meant to be role models for us. We don't want to be like them. But Jesus is saying, even looking at the broken world and all the power games that people play, you can learn something about God's ways. You don't want to be like the manager, but you can learn something from him. Like you don't want to be Archie Bunker, but you can learn a lot from Archie Bunker.

Before anything else, notice the most important thing in the parable: that big shift that takes place in who has power over the manager. First he's working for the rich man. He's been caught squandering the master's money, so the master fires him. The master says “give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.” It's clear, the manager is done. He's fired. But notice: one of the most fascinating parts of this parable is how the manager still has a little time to work the system. It's like, he's fired now. But there's still a little time before all the charges are brought against him publicly and he's thrown in jail. He's fired, but the final judgment hasn't come yet.

And look how he uses that time between getting fired and the day of final judgment. He finagles things to his advantage. No one else knows he's been fired yet; they still assume he's representing the rich man. So in a shrewd move, he goes personally to all the people who owe the rich man money, and he lowers their debts. It's possible he's cancelling the amount of interest they owe the rich man—or maybe he's cancelling out the portion that he himself regularly stole from them. Maybe a combination. Regardless, how are those debtors going to look at him now? Suddenly he's their hero! He's getting in good with them so that when judgment day arrives, and he's publicly let go from his job, they'll welcome him into their society.

So you see, he *was* serving the rich man...but who is the manager appealing to now? The people he was extorting money from. Now *they* have all the power when it comes to his life and his future. The manager has now switched masters. He is now answering to the people who were

formerly at his mercy. Now, for him, they have all the power. This change of ownership has happened. Under the old master, he was building himself up by taking wealth from others. Under the new master—he's letting go of what he used to keep for himself in order to build the debtors up, so he can have a good relationship with them. He's living for a relationship now, and not for himself. Yes, he's doing it for selfish reasons. But Jesus says we can see a shadow of the kingdom of God there. You see where he's going with this.

And to top it all off: when the master—the rich man—finds out what the manager has done, he congratulates the manager for his shrewdness. He's impressed at how well the manager has played it. You see: he realizes that the manager has *trapped* him. Because now, if he, the rich man, goes back and tries to get back that money—that interest or that extortion money or whatever from the people who were in debt—even if that money was rightfully his—HE would end up looking like the villain of the story. Isn't that amazing: the manager has tied the rich man's hands by making the rich man look generous and good and merciful to everybody.

So what do we do with all this? For one thing, in our baptism into Christ, you and I have been drowned to a whole way of life. The old life was centered in building ourselves up by keeping worldly wealth to ourselves. You could say, in Jesus, we've been fired from that position: it's clear we can't gain a future for ourselves that way. And praise God we have been fired from that desperate life, where we spend all our time working for the master who stands over us counting up the numbers and holding us accountable for every cent we collect and owe him. Praise God we don't work for that old master anymore. Because no matter how much we think we deserve, no matter much we pay out, if we're working for him, that master will pursue us till the day we die and he will squeeze every last cent, every last bit of life, out of us. A lot of people in our world are working for that boss right now.

But now Jesus has come to give us a whole new life under his management. Here's what sets the children of light apart from the children of this generation. We've been cut loose. None of the worldly wealth we build up in this life is worth anything as far as our future with God is concerned, anymore. Jesus came to show us that God holds all the cards; our wealth, our decisions, our goodness, our morality... we can't use any of this to pay for our place in the kingdom anymore. Everything we hold in this life right now belongs to God.

Every day we can remember which boss we work for. Do we work for God, or Mammon? Mammon is the god we worship when we depend on our worldly wealth. Whether it's our own goodness, our morality, our righteousness, our money—Mammon (the false god) tells us that this stuff we hold onto in this world is what guarantees us a future. Jesus guarantees that he alone is our future and the only coin we have to give to God is faith in him. And even *that* coin (faith) has to be *given* to us throughout our lives!

So what are we going to do with the amazing *worldly* wealth that has been placed in our hands. Is Mammon going to keep on holding us through our wealth? Is he going to use it to enslave us to fear? No. We've got a new master. Jesus Christ. By our actions we can tell Mammon that we don't work for him anymore. But while we're still here in this world, Jesus is making it clear that we can still use the system. We can use the money we have, we can use our time, our gifts, our resources, towards their true purpose—to build other human beings up in God's image, to

support God's work in the world, and to take care of this beautiful world God has made. Are we going to hold onto our wealth in order to make ourselves look like bosses for a while before we lose it all, or are we going to know none of it is ours anymore, and use it to make the real boss look good?

The greatest joy a human being will ever have in this world is to go out there do everything to make God look good. Because God is worth it. He is the best master, our brother, our best friend. He died on a cross for us. He lifted us up from death to beat Mammon and all the other false gods that try to enslave us in this world. He feeds us his own life . He provides for us. He will never go against his own good character. We can count on his mercy that covers all of our carelessness, all of our failures. We can forget the score we're keeping with other people, cancel all the debts we think they owe us. We can take all that he's given us, and pour it out with joy.