

Proper 20 – Year C – September 22, 2019
Amos 8:4-7 Psalm 113 1 Timothy 2:1-7 Luke 16:1-13
the Rev. Deborah Kempson-Thompson

Bernie Madoff, who was accused and convicted of defrauding

his investors,

spent his eightieth birthday in prison last year,

serving the tenth year of a 150 year sentence:

Bernard "Bernie" Madoff, former Chairman of the NASDAQ stock exchange, started his own penny stockⁱ investment advisory firm in 1960 with \$5000. In 2008, he was charged and pleaded guilty to defrauding investors in the amount of over \$50 billionⁱⁱ

Madoff spent the previous forty-eight years living

the high life bought in the beginning with money from

small time investors of modest means

who purchased from him penny stocks:

Madoff is the kind of person Amos is denouncing in today's

first lesson.

He does not represent the clever steward of Luke's parable.

You and I are the kind of people Luke addresses

as potential shrewd stewards.

The Rev. Marshall A. Jolly makes this point, commenting:

Every now and then, we come upon a passage of Scripture that is especially challenging...

at other times, texts are difficult for exactly the opposite reason: they're confusing.

As Martin Luther once said of preaching passages such as these,

“Sometimes you have to squeeze the Biblical text until it leaks the Gospel.”

Such is the case today. . .

Jesus—

the morally incorruptible, ethical exemplar—

does something that nobody expects:

He praises the corrupt manager!

Hopefully, we can all agree that that Jesus

doesn't want us to save ourselves by deceiving and cheating others.ⁱⁱⁱ

So, we might ask, what is the point of this parable?

The steward of the Gospel was accused of “wasting” the master's resources—not stealing.

The question posed in this parable is:

*Do we waste the resources
God has given us to steward?*

A steward is one who manages the property of someone else

primarily for the benefit of someone else

*The earth is the Lord's and
the fullness thereof.*

The earth and its produce are not ours to squander

but to steward—manage to the glory of God.

The meaning

of the parable of the clever steward lies in

Luke's perspective on the Good News:

“Jesus had a special sense of mission to poor and oppressed people.

At the outset of his ministry, sometimes referred to as Jesus' mission statement, Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” ([Luke 4:18-19](#))

The biographies of Jesus depict him repeatedly reaching out to those at the bottom of the social pyramid--poor people, women, Samaritans,

lepers, children, prostitutes and tax collectors. Jesus was also eager to accept people who were well-placed, but he made clear that all, regardless of social position, needed to repent. For this reason, he invited the rich young man to sell all of his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor.

Jesus commanded, "Love your neighbor." When asked to define "neighbor," Jesus expanded the traditional meaning of the word--defining our neighbor as anyone who is in need, including social outcasts: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed." ([Luke 14:13](#))^{iv}

Mind what Jesus says in this parable,

*And I tell you, make friends for yourselves
by means of dishonest wealth*

Not a particularly accurate translation—

Earthly wealth is better

Jesus continues,

so that when it is gone,

Which it will be for us when we depart this earth

those friends may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Who are these friends?

Hear Jesuit scholar John Foley's take on today's scripture:

Be Shrewd.

God in the First Reading is quite offended by his people's evil actions, just as we would expect. But in the Gospel parable we find the master of the house *rewarding a dishonest steward for cheating*. What is going on?

A question: are you shrewd? Can you get troubled circumstances to work to your advantage?

If you said yes, doesn't that mean you are un-Christian?

After all, we are supposed to dedicate ourselves to charity, giving always to others. Or at least that is the usual understanding of Christianity.

Start with the [First Reading](#). God sees that the merchants are actually agreeing to "fix their scales for cheating!"

Their actions are premeditated and deliberate.

Foley goes on to say,

This is bad enough, but they have determined also to actually buy poor people, to purchase them and their lives for silver or even for a pair of sandals!

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
never will I forget a thing they have done!

The Gospel's steward doesn't show disdain for the poor even though he
is taking care of his own future

Such slavery no longer exists in the United States, for which, hurray!

But aren't each of our own lives being bought off by luxury?

Haven't you noticed that commerce wishes to buy you with cable TV, or a
convertible, or prescription drugs, or real-estate plans, or weight reduction,
beautiful teeth, slick automobiles, perfect wheel chairs, and even breath-
freshening chewing gum (whose advertising portrays sexual promiscuity in
order to sell their gum)?

God's reaction is very clear, and we should react similarly.

God hates it.

Yet in the Gospel, a parable portrays God's attitude quite differently. The
master comes back to find that his top steward has been squandering the
master's property.

Naturally he plans to fire the man, and in this he agrees completely with
the First Reading, that cheating should not be tolerated.

But then comes the curve ball. The servant is portrayed as shrewd.

He thinks up a plan...

The master actually commends him for this plan! He tells the servant, you have been prudent in preparing a home for yourself!

At this point, Foley poses the key question today's scripture prompts:

Why does [the master] treat this dishonest servant differently
than the dishonest merchants in the First Reading?

The answer is in Sunday's Psalm 113, which says:

Praise the Lord, who lifts up the poor!

Do you think the merchants from the [reading from Amos] were "lifting up the poor"?

Weren't they buying and selling them instead, purchasing them for even "a pair of sandals"?

Well, the Gospel's steward doesn't show disdain for the poor even though he is taking care of his own future (by making friends with the poor).

He gets a portion of their debts back for the master.^v

Some scholars say, the steward achieves this by subtracting his commission from the amounts owed.

And Foley goes on to point out,

He never buys or sells [the debtors]—he makes their life a little easier by cutting their debts in half,
and he courts the master’s favor by cutting losses to his property.

So he was shrewd.

He did good by being so clever. . .

Good was served rather than evil.

Maybe the actual moral for Sunday is:

be clever when you do good.^{vi}

Luke records Jesus’ saying,

the poor shall inherit the kingdom of God.

It is the poor who will welcome us clever do-gooders

into eternal habitations – not the other way around.

Amen

ⁱ The SEC considers a penny stock to be pretty much anything under \$5. <https://www.thestreet.com/story/11260181/1/penny-stocks.html>

ⁱⁱ What Bernie Madoff Did and Who He Defrauded by Rosemary Peavler, Updated February 03, 2019
<https://www.thebalancesmb.com/bernard-madoff-and-his-ponzi-scheme-393095>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Rev. Marshall A. Jolly is Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Morganton, North Carolina. Marshall holds degrees from Transylvania University (BA, American Studies) and Emory University's Candler School of Theology (MDiv), where he is currently completing doctoral work. He curates ModernMetanoia.org--a lectionary-based preaching and teaching resource authored exclusively, Sermons that Work, www.episcopalchurch.org, 09.22.2019

^{iv} ([Matthew 19:16-30](#), [Luke 18:18-30](#), [Mark 10:17-31](#)) <https://jesuscentral.com/ji/life-of-jesus-modern/jesus-poor.php>

^v https://liturgy.slu.edu/25OrdC092219/reflections_foley.html

^{vi} *bid*