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Trinity Episcopal Church

Amos 8: 4 – 7  
1 Timothy 2: 1 – 7

Psalm 113  
Luke 16: 1 – 13

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Well! It's the second Sunday of our Fall Stewardship Program and, just like last week, we have an exercise with which to have some fun [Eric H. F. Law, *Holy Currencies*, p. 22]. We need 8 – 10 volunteers.

1. *Tight, loving community*
  - a. *Invite one person in your group to be the "outsider."*
  - b. *Everyone in your group, other than the "outsider," create a body sculpture that depicts a tight, loving community.*
  - c. *Invite the "outsider" to attempt to join this community.*
  - d. *What did you notice? What do you wonder about?*
2. *An outwardly focused community*
  - a. *Create a second body sculpture depicting a group that focuses on reaching out to others.*
  - b. *Invite the "outsider" to connect to this community.*
  - c. *Now, invite the "outsider" to find a place inside the community to rest and be nurtured.*
  - d. *What did you notice? What do you wonder about?*
3. *A community that values both internal and external relationships*
  - a. *Invite the "outsider" to join this community*
  - b. *Invite the "outsider" to find a place inside for his or her wellness*
  - c. *Invite the "outsider" find a connection to exercise his or her ministry to the outside*
  - d. *What did you notice? What do you wonder about?*
4. *Please return to your seats. What was the effect of this exercise on you? What was an 'aha' for you?*

This is an exercise about the currency of relationships (review Law's premise and cycle) – relationships both within an existing community, such as Trinity, and without with our wider community and the world. Think about Trinity for a moment. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is totally inwardly focused and 10 is totally outwardly focused, where do you think we are? What are some of the ways in which we provide a place to rest and be nurtured? What are some possible ways for us to grow in loving ourselves? What are some of the ways in which we focus on others, outside of this congregation? What are some of the ways in which we can grow in loving our neighbors? Is there a difference between "doing" church and "being" church?

Our lesson from Luke today, the parable of the shrewd steward, sounds like it could be the Gospel according to Wall Street. A very wealthy man has a steward to take care of his bookkeeping and the accounts of what people owe him. Rumor comes to the ears of the wealthy man that the steward is not doing a good job. The steward is allowing the rich man's property to be squandered away. We're not given the particulars – perhaps the steward is simply lax on collecting the debts. So the rich man calls the steward to an accounting.

The steward knows if he brings the spreadsheets to his boss now, he will certainly be sacked for not doing his job properly, and he doesn't see any good alternative occupations. So he has a creative idea. One that will work for both him and his employer. He calls in the first person who owes the rich man 100 jugs of olive oil. 'Such a deal I have for you today,' the steward tells the person. 'We're cutting your debt in half! You now only owe 50.' Then he calls in the second person who owes 100 measures of wheat. Sounding magnanimous, the steward jovially tells this person to make it 80. When the rich man comes to settle up the accounts with the steward, he realizes what is going on and he praises the steward for his business acumen and shrewdness. Presumably the steward keeps his job. The rich man calls the children of this world wiser than the Children of Light in dealing with their own kind. Jesus, in ending the parable, reiterates what the steward's own thoughts were in initiating this plan, "Use that dishonest stuff called money (i.e. the riches of this world) to make yourselves friends! Then, when it gives out, they will welcome you into homes that last!"

What a confusing parable. Is Jesus praising being so focused on money and looking out for one's own skin? Are we really supposed to use somewhat devious financial practices to get or keep ourselves out of trouble? Probably not.

There are various viewpoints from scholars on how to understand, or make some sense of, this parable. First, some scholars think that the rich man himself has been involved in some devious financial maneuvering. Jews are not allowed to charge interest on monetary loans. But some of them, just like people everywhere, find a way around that by lending in kind, with oil and wheat being two easy examples of this. It's quite likely that the amount that the steward deducts is equal to the amount of 'interest' that the rich man has been charging. The steward essentially reduces the bill to the amount of principal owed, and of course the debtors are delighted. In doing so, the steward is also protecting his boss from being caught in his own less than scrupulous dealings.

A middle ground viewpoint reminds us that this is a parable (and Luke even tells us this) – a story where two things are laid up against each other for comparison. Therefore, it is not primarily a story with a moral to it regarding how to use (or not use) money.

Thirdly, there is a somewhat contrasting viewpoint to the first one. With many first century Jewish stories and parables where there are two characters such as a master and a steward, we know to understand the master as God and the steward as Israel. (Why this contrasts with #1 is if we make it directly parallel, then we are saying that God potentially is unscrupulous.) In Israel's covenant with God, they have been charged with being stewards of God's property, the light of God's world, to show everyone else how it's done. But Israel has not lived into the covenant and Jesus is saying that Israel is being called to account, and that Israel is in imminent danger of losing its holy position as God's chosen people.

The Pharisees' answer, when the prophets have called them to task on this, has been to stick ever tighter to each and every one of the laws as a way to make Israel more holy. And by doing that, they have excluded the most vulnerable, the very people to whom Jesus has been reaching out. Remember that Jesus is always aware of the urgency of his message. N. T. Wright says that in this parable, Jesus is telling the people that if Israel is facing a crisis, the answer is not to pile on more bits and pieces of law, but rather to 'throw caution to the wind,' and make friends wherever they can. That's what the 'children of this world,' meaning Israel's pagan neighbors would do, so that's what the 'children of the light,' or Israel, ought do as well, learning from their shrewd neighbors how to cope with a crisis in this world. Jesus' advice to them is to forget hoarding land and money, and use it to create

relationships, make friends. Jesus knows that a crisis is indeed coming for the people of Israel and they will need somewhere safe to be. Quit being so naval-gazing, inwardly focused, bottom-line oriented, to paraphrase Jesus. Reach out.

In Amos, we hear God railing against the Israelites about 8 centuries before Jesus, for the very same thing. "Hear this!" God says. "You that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor (like the rich man in Jesus' parable). You that reduce the amount you offer as holy so that you can 'gain' more by practicing deceit with false balances. You that are buying and selling the poor. I will not forget what you are doing!" Deja vu all over again. The leadership of Israel is so inwardly focused on their own profit, their own well-being, that they are ignoring everyone outside of the 'holy' circle, God says in essence. Take note! Those people, the least of these, matter to me just as much as you do. Welcome them! Take care of them.

Is it good to be a worshipping community that takes care of each other? Absolutely. Is it also good to be a worshipping community that invites, welcomes and integrates others into that community and then helps them to reach out, too? Absolutely. That's what's called being both sustainable and missional and, in this case, developing a currency of relationship that knows no bounds or borders.

Earlier, we talked about "being" church versus "doing" church. Pharisees and others like them seem to be about "doing" church. What Jesus is advocating is "being" church. "Doing" has more to do with getting checks in blocks. "Being" has more to do with being present, listening, being relational.

We're in the middle of our fall Stewardship Program with the theme of "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," and the idea of recycling our blessings. We want to keep our blessings flowing in this congregation and beyond, to be both sustainable and missional, and to be a community that values both internal and external relationships. Think about your experience this morning in body sculpting as you complete and return your Time, Talent and Treasure pledges as soon as possible. On the sustainability side, we're asking everyone to prayerfully consider increasing your pledge (an average of \$23/mo). We want to develop that currency of relationship with our young people, and we want to continue strengthening ties outside these walls to respond to the needs in our community. On the missional side, we're asking you to be an active part of "being" church by pledging your time and your gifts where you feel called. So far, we've received \_\_\_\_\_ pledge forms, with a total of \$\_\_\_\_\_ pledged and \_\_\_\_\_ different ministries supported, \_\_\_\_\_ different ways to nurture relationships. Remember, the sooner we receive your pledge form, the sooner we will complete our fall Stewardship program. As we pledge, may we remember to give thanks to God from whom all our blessings really do flow.

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