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St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
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Proper 20, Year C [RCL]: Amos 8: 4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Title: A Way of Life

There were once two farm hands who worked under the guidance and supervision of a foreman. The foreman was also the manager of the farm. One day the foreman pointed to a mule and instructed the two farm hands to put the mule in the barn.

Dutifully, the two hands led the mule over to the barn but then they noticed that the mule's ears were too long such that the mule would not fit through the barn door. So, they put their heads together and decided to get a ladder and sawed the overhead of the barn door out so that they could get the mule through the door and into the barn.

As they were doing this the foreman walked over and asked them why they were sawing out the top of the barn door. The farm hands explained that the mules' ears were too big to allow him to get through the entrance into the barn and this was their solution.

Rubbing his chin, the foreman said, "Well, why don't you just get a shovel and dig some dirt out from the ground beneath the doorway, then the mule can just walk right in."

The two farm hands looked at each other with expressions on their faces which suggested they thought the foreman to be a half-wit, and one of them said to the foreman, "We TOLD you his ears are too long, not his feet!"

Life is a lot about perspective; about how we view and negotiate the challenges we encounter. Life is lot about the decisions and the choices we make and the paths we choose to follow.

The story, or parable, we have from the lips of Jesus this morning, is about such choices. But not choices as simple as having to do with mules and barns.

Jesus is speaking of choices that have serious, one might even say eternal consequences.

I think this is the message this morning from the Book of Amos. Hear we have a prophet lamenting the unfaithfulness of God's people in the form of lacking compassion for and even taking advantage of the poor. Through the prophet Amos we hear from a God who is not only greatly disturbed and disappointed by the people's ill-gotten gains at the expense of the poor, but saying to the people, that this sin is so great surely, says God, I will not be able to forget it. Now dear ones, that's a consequence of serious and significant proportion.

Jesus is saying much the same thing in that Jesus is saying life is about choices. Jesus is saying life is about the lenses through which we view the possibilities.

More to the point, Jesus is saying life is about choosing the ways of God or choosing some other path or paths. There is a path marked, 'The Ways of God' and there are paths with names like 'The Ways of Greed and Ambition.' Names like "The Path of Selfishness and Lack of Compassion." And there are a lot of other paths that represent alternatives to the ways of God.

The words Jesus uses this morning are these: Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much – as well as its opposite which would be 'whoever is unfaithful in a little will also be unfaithful in much. [And] Jesus says no slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. Then he concludes: You cannot serve both God and wealth.

If you have decided that money is your God -- if you worship it; if you live your life in a way that for all the world says that money and the obtaining of it occupies the place of primacy in your life – then you have relegated the God of the universe to the position of a side-line commentator to be tuned into when it suits us and turned off when we find it annoying.

Dear ones, Jesus talks about money and wealth more than any other single subject in the Bible. The reason is that money and wealth is probably the single greatest candidate – certainly one of the greatest candidates that compete with God for our attention and affections. It is probably the single largest candidate to be an impediment to our relationship with God, our

relationship with who God would have us be, and how God would have us be in relationship with one another.

Money and wealth is the one area in our lives that we might be most tempted to place our trust and security in, rather than in God. Money and wealth is the one thing we might be most tempted to turn into an idol. Money and wealth represent, maybe more than anything else, what we are tempted to worship at the cost of our devotion to God. I think this is why Jesus talked about it so much.

Sometimes it is put this way: Choose God or choose mammon (*money*). Put your trust in God not only in the big things but also in all the little ways God would have us be. With every choice, with every decision there is a filter through which life choices are made. Some filters, God constructed filters, are helpful and lead to good places. Others not so much. The impediment might be money, or wealth, or, of course, anything else that distracts us from heeding God's word and hearing God's compelling voice. But money and the way we view it, use it, and think about it is a prime candidates to be a wedge between us and holy living. And so, in large measure, Jesus is reminding us this morning that life is a lot about the choices that we make and that the choices we make have serious and sometimes life-defining consequences.

That's what we are being called to think about this morning, but before closing, I want to take a short trip through what might be called a sidebar in this text – a sidebar that warrants a moment or two of our attention and it is set up by way of the following question: In having the rich man commend the unjust steward is Jesus supporting unjust gain? As the Apostle Paul might say, "Heaven forbid!" Of course not.

But Jesus is taking this opportunity to teach that Christians, the followers of The Way as they soon will be called, should be at least as conscientious as secular folk in dealing wisely with whatever financial resources God has blessed us with. In fact, Christians (here called 'Children of the Light') are called to be especially careful and due diligent about their financial resources ensuring that these gifts are used wisely and, in appropriate proportion, for the building of the Kingdom of God and the work of God in the world. We call this spiritual discipline 'financial stewardship.'

In the story, the unjust steward is accused of being a not very good steward – a thing for which he is about to be fired. In response, the steward gets busy collecting that which is owed his master by way of offering the incentive of

reducing the amounts owed if they will just pay their debt off in full. Many biblical scholars suggest that what the steward was probably doing was collecting debts MINUS his own commission. By doing this, he gains favor with his master as well as making himself worthy of future employment. And for this Jesus has the master actually commending the dishonest manager. At least he was now taking care of business so to speak. At least now, though prompted by the threat of being fired, he is doing that which his master hired him to do in the first place. One might say that at some level this is a story of at least partial redemption. And maybe the so-called 'unjust manager' has learned his lesson and will now continue on the good way of a changed life as a consequence of viewing through new lenses.

But I think the primary thing Jesus would have us hear this day is that keeping our eyes on the prize, staying on the path of righteousness, staying on the path leading to peace and contentment, means listening not to the world but rather to the voice of God. Sometimes God speaks to us in that 'still, small voice.'

Sometimes that voice is the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes that voice can be in the form of our conscience speaking to us.

Sometimes that voice can be heard in response to prayer.

Sometimes that voice can be heard by way of attending to Holy Scripture, the revealed Word of God to which we are encouraged to read, mark, and inwardly digest.

Sometimes that voice can even be heard coming from a pulpit.

But by *all means* we are called to be faithful in all things and to not be led down roads or paths that take us away from, cause us to turn our backs on that which God would have us do in the manner God would have us do it.

Rather we are called to lean into God's word, lean into the still small voice, attend to the urgings of the Holy Spirit -- and let these things be our compass -- let the voices of the Holy be the lenses through which we see the world, our place in the world, and how we are to live, behave, and interact with and within it.

Amen.