

Pilgrim Virtues: A sermon for Proper 20, Year C

(Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; **Luke 16:1-13**)

By the Rev. Kyle Matthew Oliver

Let me start by saying that I'm as confused by our Gospel passage today as you might be. A manager "squanders" the resources he's been entrusted with and receives notice to get the books in order, such as they are, and prepare for the pink slip. So he scrambles around cutting deals with his master's debtors, hoping to ingratiate himself and receive eventual welcome "into their homes."

As we get ready for Jesus to pounce on the manipulative manager, the punchline all but set up, we hear instead that the master "commended" the manager's shrewd strategy. And just as we get our heads around this shocker and prepare for Jesus to write both men off as "children of this age" rather than "children of light," he tells the crowd to "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." [pause] What's the deal?

Well, let's first commend Jesus for his shrewdness too. A story with not one but two surprise endings certainly grabs his hearers' attention—no mean feat in his time or ours. And a parable that leaves us asking "What's the deal?" has achieved the overriding objective of any parable: to get us thinking hard.

A lot of very smart people have thought very hard about this peculiar parable, and I read quite a few of their attempts to make at least some sense of it. Several of them seemed to me to put too tidy a bow around a messy story dripping with ambiguity. Jesus, and Luke, were quite capable of being clearer if they wanted to be.

The interpretation I found compelling and relevant to our life together has modest ambitions. It starts by picking up on a little translation detail that would be easy to miss:

When the manager is contemplating possible landing zones for his self-made golden parachute, he speaks of being welcomed into his associates' "homes" using a greek word that means home, house, or household. When Jesus talks about the friendships we are to forge, the promised "eternal homes" would be better translated with "tabernacle," "habitation," or simply "tent."

The persuasive commentator then puts this small detail into a broad perspective on the Christian life:

"Jesus does not promise to provide what the unjust steward sought, the stable abode of those who have possessions and security. Rather, [he] promises the unstable abode of the wanderer, the refugee, and the pilgrim, whose mobility requires the dispossession of goods" [Scott Bader-Saye's "Theological Perspective" from *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox): Year C, Volume 4, pages 95–96.]

So we might paraphrase Jesus like this: You might as well throw that dishonest wealth around with some abandon, because you can't take it with you on the journey I've got in store for you.

This exposition doesn't "solve the puzzle" of this parable, but I don't think that should really be the goal. What if, instead, we just sat with the question our commentator suggested: What would it mean, what does it mean, for the people of God to be pilgrims rather than citizens, tenants rather than landlords, sojourners and wayfarers rather than the kings and queens of our own castle keeps? Here's my stab at some ... let's call them "Pilgrim Virtues":

First, pilgrims know that absolute security is an illusion. They do their best to bring provisions for

the days ahead, and to steer clear of the most dangerous obstacles. But no one is immune to famine and disease, to cycles of violence and random tragedies.

(On that note, let me pause and bid your continued prayers for the victims of the mass shooting at the Navy Yard on Monday morning; for their families, friends, and colleagues; and for all those affected by violence throughout the world. If you know someone touched by this tragedy, or if you experienced resonances with some past trauma in your own life, please remember that the clergy and people of St. Paul's are here for you. Just speak to someone after the service and we will do our best to connect you with the help you need.)

So pilgrims are not surprised by the worst that life can throw at them, but pilgrims are also thankful, as we know, for the gifts they have received. They don't have the luxury of mistaking those gifts as signs of their own value or of a contingent blessing based on good behavior or worthy offerings. Pilgrims know what it's like to be out of meal and oil, and they've learned the hard way to trust that God is present anyway. If they hadn't learned to trust and to be thankful for what they have, they never would have made it this far.

Pilgrims can also be on the lookout for opportunity. They are blessed with an awareness that the story of their people is still being written. They are resistant (though not immune) to the temptation of glorifying "the good old days." If they weren't, they probably wouldn't have ended up as pilgrims in the first place, because the memory of what was is seductive. It *seems* like a much easier dream to chase than the promise of what could be. But of course the pilgrims have it right, and the alternative is usually folly.

So what do these pilgrim virtues have to do with us? We might start by asking what false security

we're hanging onto. To add some wayfaring imagery to Bishop Jim's question from two weeks ago, what treasures are we dragging through the wilderness that should have been left in Egypt? Some things are worth carrying, as the Israelites knew. But only the essentials—pilgrims travel light. We can't limit our soul-searching to physical things: some old ways of working and worshiping, of relating to each other and our neighborhood, will probably need to change. God is doing a new thing, but none of us knows entirely what. That's why we're on a pilgrimage.

How about thanksgivings? What do we have to celebrate, right here, right now, even among much uncertainty? My first idea is the incredible talent and dedication in our music program under Robert McCormick's steady direction. I can't think of a better way to celebrate our choirs than with more music, and I hope to see many of you here Friday night to support their ministry and join in the fun. Sharing and retweeting our social media posts about the event wouldn't hurt either.

Another gift I've heard the parish buzzing about these past couple weeks is, and you can't make up these coincidences, pilgrims: the Pilgrims in Christ class. As someone who makes his living as a Christian education consultant in training, I cannot understate to you what a tremendous blessing it is to have newcomers, long-time members, and a team of dedicated teachers so excited for a year-long faith formation experience that meets for two evening hours every single week. If I even suggested something like that to anyone who called our center at the seminary looking for ideas, they'd probably still be laughing at the absurdity. But Pilgrims is transforming lives in this parish, even in a year of transition. I'm thankful for everyone taking the plunge.

But what opportunities to use our many and distinctive gifts haven't we thought of yet? What life-changing ministries lie just beyond the horizon? What unmet needs are we just starting to get an

inkling about? What new ways to share the love of Christ are seeking root in the fertile soil of our hearts and minds?

We'll miss these opportunities if we're busy engineering a soft landing into business as usual or serving masters other than the Lord of All. We'll miss them if we expect them to be unambiguous or tidy or painless.

But those who have taken a leap of faith in this life know the sure provision and surprising pleasures of a pilgrimage in Christ. It takes an ability to stay calm, to keep alert, to let go. It may even take some holy shrewdness.

The one thing we can be sure of is that God will be there in the thick of it, even if we don't always understand how.