

9.21.2025 Pentecost 15

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

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

“Faithfulness in all things”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today’s psalm reads, “[*The Lord*] *raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.*” These words remind us that God’s priorities are clearly with the poor and the needy. God sent his Son to seek out the lost and the outcast, and today’s reading from Amos reflects this: “*Hear this, you who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land...Surely, I will not forget any of their deeds.*”

What is at stake in these readings is God’s commitment to justice for the weak and our faithfulness to the work God gives to us, whether it be small or large. This golden ethical thread, running through Hebrew scripture, is Jesus’ focus in today’s gospel.

Jesus tells a parable to his disciples about a dishonest manager meant to bring into focus discipleship as faithfulness in both small and large things. In the parable, a rich man had entrusted the care of his property to a manager. This was a common practice in the ancient near Middle East and Roman world. The rich man was perhaps the owner of vast estates, entrusting them to property managers who were to work in the best interests of the owner.

We are not told exactly how the manager had been squandering the owner’s property. It could have been any number of things: negligence, incompetence, embezzlement, or open theft. It really doesn’t matter because he had been entrusted to manage the owner’s property and was found to be dishonest. To make matters worse, the manager falsified the accounting books to save both himself and his master’s accounts.

We are to assume that the reduction in the accounts would have been a reduction of the profit that the dishonest steward would have received had he not been caught. In this way, it sounds like he canceled any profit he might have planned on receiving by reducing the actual debts of his master’s debtors, and thus, protecting the actual amount that he, the manager, owed to the master. The master praised the dishonest manager for his shrewdness in “cooking the books.” By giving these financial discounts to his master’s debtors, the dishonest manager essentially hoped that they would later repay him, welcoming him into their homes.

This parable has long been a difficult one for biblical interpreters. However, the point of the parable becomes very clear when Jesus says, “*Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.*” To help make this clear, I remember someone telling me the story of someone going to a company who was to be interviewed for a key managerial position. On the day of the interview this person was in line in the company cafeteria, and along with a lunch entrée and sides, this person took two pats of butter, covering them with a napkin. When the meal was rung up the register, the butter hidden under a napkin was not

charged. Early that afternoon after lunch, this person went into the office of the boss and sat down for the interview, facing the person who had been behind them in line. The boss has seen this person's dishonesty in the very small matter of two pats of butter and said, "This interview is over. I was behind you in line today and saw what you did at lunch with the butter, and I cannot, therefore, entrust you with this managerial position."

Like Jesus' words, "*Whoever is dishonest in very little is also dishonest in much*," the point is that the manager had been entrusted with his master's property. He was a fiduciary or a trustee of his master's estate. The word "fiduciary" comes from a Latin word "*fiducia*," meaning trust or faithfulness. To be a manager is to be entrusted with something that belongs to someone else. Jesus, of course, drives home the point of the parable saying "*You cannot serve two masters...you will be devoted to one and hate the other. You cannot serve God and wealth*" – even if it's only two extra pats of butter. Jesus is saying two things: first, to be faithful to the work we are given requires honesty and diligence; second, to be faithful to God requires great care because wealth can quickly replace God as an object of worship.

Jesus told these things, not to the crowds, but rather, to his disciples. Jesus was both warning his disciples that wealth can easily replace God, and he was also encouraging his disciples to be faithful in their work because as his apostles, they be entrusted with his love for the world. Jesus would be entrusting them with a message and work far more valuable than money yet work that would require the management of often vast sums of wealth and property. As disciples, would God govern their lives, or would the pursuit of wealth govern them?

I remember an early experience with this when I was elected chairperson of the Lutheran Association in Tokyo, which is a nonprofit foundation with substantial assets chartered to do charitable work. After I was elected, I went downtown to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the government body with which the Lutheran Association was registered as a legal entity. As the incoming board chair, it was my name that was registered as the person responsible for the organization. As a young 34-year-old pastor, I was suddenly very aware of being a fiduciary of property that belonged to the Lutheran Association, but answerable to both the ELCA and the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church. Beginning in 1892, over one hundred years earlier, these assets had been given for Christian mission work in Japan by predecessor church bodies. The Lutheran Association had weathered the storm of war, economic challenge, and cultural shifts throughout the postwar era, and I was to be faithful to Christ's work begun in Japan long before I was born.

Years later, I was appointed to be a member of the board of trustees of a large Christian women's university in Japan founded in 1918. One of our principal responsibilities was to guide and help the university to grow and change, while retaining its mission as a Christian institution in an increasingly secular world. To be a trustee was about the management of a university with the Christian faith at its very center. We were entrusted with something older and larger than ourselves

– at the center of which is God’s love for this world expressed in academic learning and research, meant to raise up young Christian leaders in various sectors of society for the future.

I tell these stories because all of us are fiduciaries of things that have been entrusted to us. The obvious and yet most profound thing we are entrusted with is our very lives. We have each been entrusted with a personality, with talents, and with time. How are you using what God has entrusted you with over your lifetime? How are you using the gift of your life for family and friends, for work and relationships in your community?

I tell these stories because we, the members and friends of St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, have been also entrusted with this church and its mission. We are the living and breathing body of Christ in this place. 166 years ago, long before we were born, this congregation was founded in 1859, and today we are Jesus’ disciples managing God’s mission in this place. It is an awesome responsibility, and Christ’s mission needs of all of us: our personalities and gifts, our ideas and hopes, our financial gifts and most of all – our faithfulness in all things to Jesus Christ.

A church is a center of mission, radiating God’s love outward toward the world. Like the golden ethical thread in the Hebrew scriptures, we are to love God and neighbor, caring for the poor and needy, lifting them and giving them hope. We do this with our Soup Kitchen, Room in the Inn, Kairos Prison Ministry, our food pantry and social ministries. We exist not solely for ourselves; but rather, we are the church only when we exist as Jesus Christ for others.

This is the work God has entrusted to us. As Paul wrote to Timothy, there is “*one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus...*” Faithfulness means living for and pointing to the Mediator, Jesus Christ. He has forgiven and freed us so we can love and forgive others.

God promises to remember our faithfulness in life and work, saying in the words of Amos, “*Surely I will remember their deeds.*”

Are you faithful in all things for Christ? Like the disciples, God has entrusted you with his love for this world.

Be faithful to God’s trust. Amen.