

Sermon – Luke 16:1-13
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Grace Lutheran Church
18 Pentecost – Year C
18 September 2016

“Cooking the Books, or Creative Accounting for the Kingdom”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Honesty, as you know, is the best policy. This nugget of American wisdom was first written by Sir Edwin Sandys of the Virginia Company in 1599; in the years since, this sentiment about truth has become embedded in our collective consciousness because, well, it's true. Truth is good and that's the truth. I know this truth about truth to be true as both a parent and as a citizen. As a parent, I hope to ingrain in our children's minds few things more than a desire and willingness to tell the truth. Erika and I expect to hear the truth out of a child's mouth. We want them to know that, whatever they've done or failed to do, they shouldn't lie about it. A lie only compounds the problem, otherwise dealt with easily enough. Whatever you did, we might tell a child, is done. But don't lie about it. It's one of our main parental talking points. And as a citizen, I'm aware of how expedient it has become for politicians to make up the truth as they go. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but there's a presidential election underway, and the honesty, or lack thereof, of certain candidates has become a foundational focus of the whole affair. Who's telling the truth? Does it even matter, or is the truth just one more malleable reality to be shaped to reflect a candidate's stature? If I were the parent of a candidate, I'm pretty sure I would simply say, “Look, whatever you did, whatever you believe, just be honest, for goodness' sake!” For the sake of goodness, tell the truth, because dishonesty is bad, period.

2. This, no doubt, squares with God's intention for humanity. All the way back to the Garden of Eden, we see dishonesty compounding original sin, as Adam and Eve made things worse by hiding their sin behind fig leaves of lies. As the years went by, dishonesty became an ever-increasing problem, leading to the breakdown of society, of the decency and neighborly care that God envisioned. By the time of the prophet Amos, the problems created by deceit have come to a head, as we see in our first reading today. The rich have become oppressors of the poor. Amos tells of merchants who mess with the ephah and the shekel, pawning off less for more – less for others and more for themselves. As early purveyors of title loan scams, they would sell grain to those without money, accepting instead their sandals as collateral. They would take the sandals off the very feet of the poor in exchange for grain, but they wouldn't even give good grain in exchange, giving instead the sweepings of the floor that were mostly useless, non-nutritious chaff. The poor could buy their sandals back, but when they didn't have money for grain today, how would they have money for grain *and* for their sandals tomorrow? Sadly, there is nothing new under the sun. The poor continue to have the system gamed against them, and God, I'm sure, continues to weep. In Amos's day, God viewed such practices as cause to let the nation suffer for its sin, and so we suffer still today – all of us, rich and poor and in between, all of us poorer for our failure to provide for the basic needs of all God's children. Honesty has always been the best policy, and we, in our sin, have fallen dreadfully short. The gap between those who have and those who have not has grown to grotesque proportions. While we ourselves may not engage in overtly dishonest activities, there is no doubt that most of us here today benefit from the basic breakdown of God's desire that we would care for one another, profiting from a system rigged against those without privilege.
3. While we fail, consistently, to live up to God's call for honest living and truthful practice, at least it makes sense. In spite of our failures, we, as parents and citizens, understand that we've fallen short. We grasp, even in

our own dissembling, the simple truth that truth is good. And into this situation comes Jesus, the One we proclaim to be the way, the life, and, yes, the truth. Which leaves us scratching our heads, right? What is today's parable about, this story of a dishonest manager who gets into trouble by being dishonest and gets out of trouble by being *more* dishonest, this steward who is commended by Jesus for his shrewd, less-than-truthful machinations? Is Jesus suggesting that dishonesty can be good? It's tempting to try to walk back Jesus' words here, to say that he's saying something other than what he's really saying. But playing with the words of God's chosen Messiah usually isn't a good idea. So what is Jesus up to?

4. Jesus doesn't say that manager acted honestly; instead, he commends him for his dishonesty, for his shrewd use of other people's wealth. Again, what gives? Jesus knows he is dealing with sinners, those who have no power to stop being dishonest, even when they know they should. So if we can't stop being dishonest, perhaps, Jesus says, we can be shrewd and dishonest in a different way. Jesus is inverting the sin of this world for the sake of God's kingdom. The problem in Amos's time, and the problem so often in our own, is that we are cold and calculating for our own benefit, willing to warp the truth to line our own pockets. What if, Jesus suggests, we became shrewd for the sake of others? What if we did whatever we could, however we could, to improve the lives of others? What would it look like if we went out of our way to lift up the lives of those suffering unjustly under the weight of debt, poverty, and oppression?
5. This summer, after we had finished our mission work in Martin, Slovakia, our group from Grace spent several days in Krakow, Poland. During our time there, we visited Schindler's Factory, where war profiteer and Nazi Party member Oskar Schindler manufactured enamelware and munitions during World War II. But while he had acquired the factory solely to line his own pockets while the world went up in flames, Schindler soon developed an

affinity for his Jewish workforce. He had always bribed those in power, but while he had once done so to secure contracts leading to his own wealth, as the years passed he continued to bribe and lie for the benefit of the *Schindlerjuden*, the Schindler Jews, to keep them safe from the concentration camps and the gas chambers; in 1944, he created his famous list of 1,200 Jews, spiriting them away from near-certain death to the hope of life. Oskar Schindler began the war as a liar and a cheat and he ended the war in the same way. The difference was that he started off lying and cheating for his own gain; by the end of the war he was doing so at great risk to himself for the sake of others. Schindler is a model for us, not because he was honest, but because he was willing to risk everything to make better the lives of those who could not help themselves. While it makes us scratch our heads, dishonesty can be good in this dishonest world. What can we do, in what shrewdness are we called to engage, to invert this broken world for the sake of those left out or left behind by social or political injustice?

6. But we are, of course, getting ahead of ourselves. Before this parable is a tale of morality, or an encouragement to immorality for the sake of God's Kingdom, this parable is, like all parables, about Jesus. And where is Jesus in this parable? There's only one answer, surprising as it may be for us, we who continue to confuse Jesus for a goody-two-shoes that we can easily wrap our heads around. Jesus, of course, is none other than the dishonest manager himself. We, after all, are the ones terribly indebted to God our master, not for containers of wheat or jugs of olive oil, but because we have engaged in systematic sin to oppress others and enrich ourselves in wealth and prestige. We are the ones who have debts to God that we cannot pay. And what does Jesus do? He cooks the books, coming to us with an offer that we would be fools to refuse, slashing our accounts to nothing and setting us free, extravagantly and abundantly giving to us the master's wealth that we do not deserve. Like the debtors in the parable, we've done nothing to merit such a gift; we haven't even asked for it. But so it is with Jesus, this One who engages

in creative accounting so that we no longer owe anything at all. Whatever is on the books against us, Jesus erases. He risks everything; he dies, so that we would owe nothing – so that we will live. He, Jesus, undoes the whole cosmic accounting system and sets us free. Free to stop serving our own desires and to start serving one another in any way we can, by any shrewdness we can dream up. Free to stop serving the master of wealth and to instead serve Jesus, gaming the system in his name for the sake of the poor and downtrodden. I know it's hard to imagine Jesus as anything other than a projection of our own best values, honesty and the like. But honesty, good as it is, isn't the best policy. Jesus is the best policy, and Jesus has closed the books on the old accounting system. We're free. We're forgiven. We don't owe a dime. As people who have been given the Kingdom instead of the debtors' prison we deserve, perhaps we can begin to live out God's dream for others, too, in any shrewd way we can cook up. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.