

Sermon: Year C, Proper 20

Texts: Amos 8:4-12

I Timothy 2:1-8

Luke 16:1-13

What happens when with sudden clarity the world becomes defined by imminent threat? This is the question that Jesus posed in the story told in the Gospel reading this morning. Long before Dilbert ever appeared, Jesus provided us this unfortunate middle manager, who, for his lack of performance, was told to settle his accounts. He had been canned. Facing the loss of his job, the manager scrambled to salvage what he could. His first refuge was his own shrewdness. Quickly cooking the books for his own benefit, he afforded favors to those who reported to him so that, in due time, when troubles befell him, they might return his apparent kindness. It was a move of such imaginative flair that even the Master commended the manager for his scurrilous ingenuity. Today, we might be tempted to call it practical wisdom, an effective blend of audacity and cleverness that simply gets things done.

As Jesus himself knew, such shrewdness can be deeply seductive – regardless of its real consequences. Never mind that these actions should have been judged unethical. They were wily and sharp, and all of us know what it feels like to be at risk. We can appreciate such inventive solutions. When threats seem imminent, highest value is given to the sheer capacity to outsmart opponents. We admire those who can be brilliant and cunning under stress, who somehow always pull out a win or, at very least, manage to land on their own feet.

It may be the case that few of us have ever felt threatened with the kind of immediacy portrayed in this story; nonetheless, the world we live in, the world we largely take for granted, is the very one that Jesus described. The terms we use are gentler, but the interplay is the same. Threats abound, which must be met by refined shrewdness. We worry about losing what we have, and we worry about losing out on the opportunities we want. There's always someone else waiting in the wings to take our place. We are engaged in a great, global competition (so we are told), and somewhere somebody may be gaining advantage. Jobs disappear. Companies outsource. Technologies make persons obsolete. Therefore the urgent task set before us is training in cleverness, learning how to secure as much as we can as soon as we can, honing our abilities to adapt, improvise, and innovate – shrewdly – so that we will be better positioned to thrive.

If you doubt the prevalence of this general stress, consider this single report. In an expansive survey done by Harvard University in 1998, 27% of all households making more than 100,000 dollars per year stated that they could not afford to buy everything they really needed. In 1998, households making more than 100,000 ranked in the top 5% of all American households. They ranked in the top half of 1% worldwide, and still, they could not buy what they needed. For the remaining 99% of the world's population, their condition was all the more dire. Almost ten years later, China is rising, oil reserves are diminishing, terrorists are proliferating, and credit is drying up. The need to be unflinchingly shrewd has never been greater.

The trouble with this perspective, however, as Jesus wryly noted, is that while shrewdness may be impressive in the moment, it lasts no longer than its moment. In the next, another scheme is hatched, another opportunity arises, and, having lived by the sword of cleverness, you may be slain by it – you may be one more 8 track tape thrown into the dustbin of irrelevance. With just one word, Jesus' analysis of his story turned biting caustic: “make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth,” he chided, “so that when it is gone, your new friends may welcome you into an *eternal* habitation.”

And there's the rub. We turn our best efforts toward developing skills that are temporary, exhausting, and ultimately, self-defeating – all in the attempt to stave off the numerous threats that constitute global living. And we're shortsighted if we think this predicament is new. It was, in fact, the very seduction that led to our original exile from the Garden of Eden. One bite of the apple, the serpent said (who, reportedly, was more crafty than any other creature God had made), and we would become our own masters, like God, shrewd managers, ourselves, of all knowledge. We would be independent, self-made, and, as Cain and Abel immediately made tragically clear, fiercely competitive. Our lives ceased to be gift. They became contest instead. And all the rest of the Bible records our repeated refusal to believe otherwise. God freed Israel from the tyranny of Pharaoh, but no sooner were they free than they began to complain that it would have been better to die in Egypt. God brought Israel to Canaan, but as soon as they crossed the Jordan, they demanded their own king – kings which soon divided Israel itself. The prophet Amos has left us his own devastating witness of those who trampled the needy, the shrewd winners of his time who were eager for the Sabbath to end so that they could deal deceitfully. And again, the result was plunder and exile.

Yet we are not left in this place, for Jesus' story serves a second and more fundamental purpose. We are told, too, that, in truth, the world is not defined by struggle, in spite of all our protestations. Before all else – and enduring through the course of all events – the world, said Jesus, is actually still God's, and we, along with all creation, are the very expression of God's infinite delight and God's unfailing faithfulness. If you plumb this reality deeply enough, and if you try to stretch it to the limitlessness of the eternal (which is only appropriate with God), then everything we take for granted falls away, and threats become less significant, and, finally, there is little room left for shrewdness and little need either.

For what opens for us, instead, is the persistence of God's charity. Creation does not stand alone. It isn't a system adrift. It's only a beginning, the first revelation of God's redemption. The entire world exists under God's assurance that nothing passes into oblivion, and when the world is seen in this light, then we may choose to root our lives not in shrewdness, but in devotion instead, a devotion that can be just as ingenious and inventive. But it's the skill of offering rather than acquiring, of trusting rather than conniving. It builds up rather than conquers. We all know this in part. We enjoy this among friends and family as time allows. But we practice devotion more as an exception than as a rule. We tend to be timid in charity – staid and reserved. Audacity we save for business, for mammon. We often show more eagerness and sagacity reconciling our checkbooks than we do consciously giving thanks for the day.

To serve God, however, is to be audacious in a different direction – daring in our embrace of others, daring in our confidence in God's providence, daring in our joy in all that is given – because it will not be taken away. So... Jesus confronts us with this question: How sagacious are you in these matters, of spirit and devotion? How intent are you, how skilled and deeply imaginative are you in tending with gladness the things that have been given without request and endure beyond every mark of demise? A major reason for the malaise of mainline Christianity is that we have centered our faith on merely finite concerns and have closed off eternity as somehow irrelevant or irrational. But this is the very dimension of God and the expression of all of God's creation. It's time we reclaim a world defined in such expansive and gracious terms.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen