

Luke 16:1-13

As most of you know last weekend, 14 of us went to Heifer International's Overlook Farm in Rutland Massachusetts. I will let some of them tell a bit more of their experience at the Children's Service on October 7<sup>th</sup>, but suffice it to say, we had a great time. We worked on a farm even with a camel, we experienced what life is like in some Developing nations, again, with a camel, and we learned how we can help care for some of the most vulnerable members of our global community.

But during our time there, I have to confess that I am not particularly proud of at least a FEW of my actions. Perhaps it was exhaustion, the cold, or more likely hunger, but my first world greed took over at certain parts on our trip. And under the auspice that a little confession is good for the soul, I stand before you now, ready to confess. It all began in the Global Village. In the Global Village, there are areas set up like different countries in the developing world. The idea is to stay there overnight and deal with similar conditions and situations as in those countries. On our second day, half of our group moved into a cinder block home in "Guatemala." Others of us moved into an open air, elevated home in Thailand. Thailand, I might add, seemed awfully cold for a tropical environment. After settling in with sleeping bags on a wooden floor, we were told to go the Market, where the kids were given money that was the equivalent to a family's earnings in Thailand, and they were told to buy ingredients for dinner. The idea was for the KIDS to learn responsibility by managing our money, bargaining for dinner, and cooking our meal, themselves. Adults were not supposed to help. We were not even allowed into the market. Hunger, however, has a way of asserting itself, or at least my stomach did.

From outside, we adults could see that front and center in the market were grave temptations. There were Coca Colas and candies and chips calling out to those with cash. I could see their eyes glaze over as the High Fructose Corn Syrup beckoned. But one coke could consume our entire food budget. I was a bit fearful, I was also ravenous. And did I mention that we had barley and milk for lunch in Tibet? I was fairly certain that even if I had to steal, I wanted more than a small, bag of chips, split 7 ways. I told the kids. I pleaded and prayed for them not to fall prey to temptation. I trespassed all the carefully prescribed adult boundaries to the market. I would not let them make a mistake, even if that was part of their learning process. I was not the only one. When a certain child almost fell prey to some Jolly Ranchers, our usually mild-mannered, Junior Warden came undone with protest.

My Thailand group eventually agreed to purchase ingredients for a Thai Chili sauce, and vegetables, and rice. Things produced in our "home" country were cheaper. But even with responsible choices, the system was rigged and there was no way that we could get everything that we wanted. They started to not get vegetables. Then, they almost sacrificed the salt. I realized that some of our dreams of a good meal would not come true, could not with our money, but I was not about to let them sacrifice vegetables or seasoning! In short, I came undone. "Bargain with them," I yelled. "Ask them to throw in a pinch of salt for the same price.... Dear Lord, don't forget garlic." Our first world appetites were practically knocking down the children so that we could get to the feed trough. And though I am not proud of my lack of boundaries, I confess that I was happy that the kids acquiesced and bought vegetables, chile, rice, and salt. It did not seem like much; there was no protein, but it was more than some moldy bag of chips.

Certainly, I, bent the rules. No amount of rationalizing will change that. But I can say that as a result, the kids did buy the right sorts of food, though perhaps not for the right reasons. They should have purchased the foods without my intervening. They should have done the right thing for the right reasons. But that is what I would like to talk about today, doing the right thing for perhaps the wrong reasons. Just as the kids might have bought dinner because we told them to and not because they wanted to, doing the right thing for the wrong reasons is an ethical quandry that has confounded philosophers, perplexed theologians, and sometimes me when I'm hungry in Thailand. But, the fact is, sometimes, life just happens that way. Though most sermons aim for us to do the right thing for the right reasons, that situation is probably rare. So, after having a short, two day visit to highlands of Thailand, I am humbled and want to speak about something more human: the right things for the wrong reasons.

In today's Gospel, Jesus addresses this very reality. He tells a parable about a property owner and the manager of said property. The parable is in the Gospel of Luke right after the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And in this parable, the manager is about to be fired. Someone in the community has gossiped about him to his boss, claiming that the manager has handled his duties poorly, that he is dishonest. And this inspires fear for the landowner. The landowner is scared that he will look like a fool to his community. And it is important to note that losing respect and status for the landowner would have been worse than losing money. And so, without any first hand proof, the manager is told that he will be fired. This, of course, inspires fear and panic for the manager, knowing that he will lose his own social status. And so, the manager cleverly calls together every person indebted to the landowner. And he cuts their debts, reduces them. He hopes that this will ingratiate him to the debtors, who might offer him a job. He operates solely out of self interest. But there is also an unintended consequence: The debtors, now forgiven suddenly see the landowner in a new light: he seems forgiving and generous. Everyone's rep is protected. And the put it bluntly *the manager has done the right thing for the wrong reasons*. Because he has forgiven debts, even if out of self-protection, he has brought salvation to all involved.

And Jesus says, "If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? In other words, Jesus commends the dishonest manager for doing the right thing, forgiving, for the wrong reason, self interest. And this is important and profound. This is something that our puritanical sides should note. Here is the son of God, acknowledging that in this situation, even in the situation of life, there are no easy answers. The landowner, the manager, the community, all exist in an unjust society. They live in a society where reputation is worth more than truth, and where debts are racked up like high risk mortgages. And in the middle of all of this, the manager ends up protecting the landowner by forgiving debts. He does good even in a bad system.

Jesus is saying, "I know it is rough out there, but there is still room for good decisions." And in this case, what ends up doing good is forgiveness, forgiveness of a debt. And this forgiveness transforms everything. In a very real sense, the parable of the unjust manager is really the same as the Prodigal Son. In both forgiveness is salvation, and in both, forgiveness is not an easy straight forward system, but a murky, confusing place that seems difficult to navigate. Jesus, here, is saying that despite our common concern with the bottom line, aka wealth, and on

everyone getting his or her just due, the kingdom of God is about something completely different. It is about forgiveness and grace and about giving everyone a share (and actively working toward that). And God does not care if we forgive for the right reasons or the wrong reasons. It is simply that we should forgive, at all times and in all places.

Looking at our world, God could easily sound like Amos in our first reading. God could just condemn us when we do injustice or do not care for our global community. After a weekend at Heifer international, I certainly feel the pain of the disparities in our social systems, and there is an inclination toward judgement both of myself and others. But instead of condemning us, which might make sense in dollars and spreadsheets, God works through us, even our poor motivations to bring us back to God. If we let God, God can take selfishness and turn it into forgiveness, take empty baskets and turn them into food for five thousand, and take shame and death and turn them into life. Though I see disparity when I look at the world, though I see bottom lines, as a Christian, I have to trust that God will take our selfish ways, and transform them. I have to trust that God will keep bringing us back to grace and forgiveness. But to do that, to allow that love into our world, to allow ourselves to be transformed, we have to trust in the power of forgiveness over the power of the bottom line (concept of “bottom line” in this parable used by Paul Neuchterlein).