

## **“In What Ways Are We Trustworthy?”**

In what ways are we trustworthy? Friends – in person and at a physical distance, the Spirit of God (that is, fathomless Love) has gathered us together on this fifteenth of twenty-four Sundays in the long, green, growing season of Ordinary Time in the circle of our church year. As we enter now into an extended moment of reflection, let’s each wonder: in what ways am I trustworthy? Let us pray: Spirit of God, empower us with serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, empower us with courage to change the things we can, and empower us with wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

Fellow travelers on the road of life, I invite you to wonder with me this morning about the parable we’ve just heard Mary read – the story Jesus told his disciples about the steward or manager of a wealthy landowner’s property. Many of us have been raised to believe that there is always right and wrong. Intellectually and spiritually, we might gravitate toward celebrating shades of grey. Yet we can also recognize our tendency to label behaviors (by ourselves and others) as either right or wrong. Whether that tendency to judge comes mostly by nature or mostly by nurture, it is a dominant feature of how many of us have come to make sense of the phenomena surrounding us.

Given our inclination to judging ourselves and others and before we dive into examining the parable, I wonder: what initial responses have you had to the parable’s main character? Right off the bat, we learn that he has mismanaged property (other biblical translations use terms such as wasting or squandering). So here we might judge the steward to be irresponsible. Upon receiving the news of his severance, the steward begins to think of a way to survive or even thrive in the midst of his loss of employment. What do you think of the scheme he hatches?

While still in his official capacity as steward, he unilaterally decides to forgive a portion of each of several debts owed to his employer.

What does this move tell us about the steward's character? At first glance, he seems opportunistic, safeguarding his own wellbeing by trying to garner friends during a tumultuous moment in his life. The steward attempts to leverage his formal power as a still employed property manager to ease the debts of people in the wider community, thereby gaining their favor.

With the end of his employment looming, the steward draws on his filthy lucre (that is, monetary profit gained through dishonest means) to ease the debts of people with fewer financial assets than he. What do you think of this move? The landowner calls him enterprising. Jesus describes this behavior as trustworthy and indicative of a deeper reverence for God than for money. Trustworthy can be defined as worthy of confidence, dependable, able to be relied on as honest or truthful.

To review, we may assess the steward to be irresponsible, opportunistic, enterprising, or trustworthy. We may perceive in him a mix of those character traits. Or do you see something else in the property manager? I was initially surprised by the qualities that stood out most clearly to me this week – honesty and humility. Early in the parable, we get a glimpse into his thought process during a moment of crisis and extreme stress in his life. And his thought process revealed something about his character and core values. We heard,

*“The steward thought, ‘What will I do next? My employer is going to fire me. I can’t dig ditches. I’m ashamed to go begging. I have it! Here’s a way to make sure that people will take me into their homes when I’m let go.’”* (Luke 16: 3-4)

I wonder, can you see yourself in the steward? When have you last taken a long pause when you’ve either hurt someone or been hurt by another, letting the creative pause invite you into clear recognition of your own part in causing the hurt alongside recognition of the hurt another may have caused you?

Slowing our pace in the midst of conflict (as opposed to jumping right into a passive defensive reaction or a blustery offensive reaction) provides space in time to develop clarity.

In a congregation I formerly served, we utilized a multisensory method of Sunday School called Godly Play for groups spanning age three through grade 5. Developed by a now retired Episcopal priest, author, educator, and former lawyer Jerome Berryman, Godly Play fosters a posture of wonder about the Spirit's movements in biblical stories and in our own lives. Children in Sunday School groups would watch as their leaders unfolded a story from Hebrew or Christian scriptures each Sunday. The storyteller would move wooden figures through a desert box as the children individually and collectively took in a story. At the end of each story, they weekly had the opportunity to wonder quietly or aloud in response to four questions:

- I wonder, what was your favorite part of this story?
- I wonder, what was the most important part of this story?
- I wonder, is there anything we could leave out and still have all the story we need?
- I wonder, what part of this story is about you?

These four questions would encourage thoughtful, heartfelt wondering from children (sometimes voiced aloud, sometimes pondered silently). Year upon year, I would hear how adults in the Sunday school program grew in faith and insight alongside the children. Today, these Godly Play questions offer us a way to explore Jesus' parable about the land manager in a deeper personal way. Let's hear again just the parable portion of the reading from the sixteenth chapter of Luke. I invite you to close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so. Listen to the story again, letting it open your mind and heart into a posture of wondering. I will leave an extended moment of silence after each question. Let us hear directly to our hearts:

*“There was a wealthy landowner who, having received reports of a steward mismanaging the property, summoned the steward and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? Give me an account of your service, for it’s about to come to an end.’*

*The steward thought, ‘What will I do next? My employer is going to fire me. I can’t dig ditches, I’m ashamed to go begging. I have it! Here’s a way to make sure that people will take me into their homes when I’m let go.’*

*So the steward called in each of the landowner’s debtors. The steward said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my employer?’*

*The debtor replied, ‘A hundred jars of oil.’ The steward said, ‘Take your invoice, sit down quickly and make it fifty.’ To another the steward said, ‘How much do you owe?’ The answer came, ‘A hundred measures of wheat,’ and the steward said, ‘Take your invoice and make it eighty.’*

*Upon hearing this, the owner gave this devious worker credit for being enterprising!” (Luke 16: 1-8a)*

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- I wonder, what was the most important part of this story?
- I wonder, is there anything we could leave out and still have all the story we need?
- I wonder, what part of this story is about you?

This morning we are asking ourselves, in what ways are we trustworthy (that is - worthy of confidence, dependable, able to be relied on as honest and truthful)? We can learn lessons from the steward as he found himself in a pressurized situation. He became more honest with himself about his aptitudes and prospects as he faced unemployment. He built upon his moment of honesty to sort out a way to build bridges for future days, doing the good that was within his power to do that day. In what situation in your life are you building or fortifying bridges of trust through honest, truthful speech and action?

We heard in the reading from the prophet Amos: *“God swears by the Pride of Jacob [that is, by God’s own name], ‘I will never forget a single thing you have done’”* (Amos 8:7). What does it mean for God, the loving energy that sustains and connects everything, to remember every single thing we do? I think it resonates with the oft used metaphor of a pebble dropping in a pond, causing rippling rings of movement that stretch out beyond its own location. I believe God remembering every single thing you or I do means that our speech and behavior have impacts that stretch deeper and wider across the life of the Earth than we might at first recognize.

Let’s revisit today’s full reading from the prophet Amos, open to hearing a fresh word spoken into this moment in our shared life as a congregation We heard,

*“Listen to this, you who live off of the needy and oppress the poor of the land, you who say, ‘If only the New Moon were over so we could sell our grain,’ and ‘When Sabbath is over, we will sell our wheat – charging higher prices for smaller portions, thus tilting the scales in our favor. That way, we can buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals—and even make a profit on the chaff of the wheat!’ God swears by the Pride of Jacob [that is, by God’s own name], ‘I will never forget a single thing you have done.’”* (Amos 8: 4-7)

Friends, we are working diligently to build vital, sustainable ministries as a congregation. The elbow grease is veritably dripping off of many elbows gathered here this morning. We give thanks for the faithfulness each of us demonstrates – faithfulness to Jesus’ call to embody the love of God in the world. And yet there is still more work be done – a load that newcomers can shoulder with us. After worship today and via Zoom next Sunday, our Justice and Outreach Team will gather us for a Social Justice Planning Conversation. With which marginalized people groups and with which spaces in the aching Earth do you long for us to collaborate toward a tilting of the scales in their favor? Please join us in the conversation.

Your voice can have impact like the pebble in the pond as we seek to be trustworthy in our wider community - worthy of confidence, dependable, able to be relied on as honest and truthful.

Friends, if we long to be trustworthy in our personal lives and collectively, then we have work to do. In a space in your life where there is hurt and a strained relationship, let the land steward (with all his irresponsible, opportunistic, enterprising, and trustworthy behaviors) embolden you to take a long, creative pause for letting in recognition of your own part in causing hurt and your own potential for building a bridge.

And in the space of this congregation, let your voice be heard as we seek to follow Amos in doing justice in our wider community, becoming ever more trustworthy with each move that we collectively make. Love is counting on us.  
Amen!

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Amos 8: 4-7, Luke 16: 1-13