

## Things That Endure

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

Have you noticed that we have begun to lose daylight? After dark lately the sky has been crystal clear. The other night, as I was walking from my car, I looked up and noticed how brilliant the stars were. Living in rural Virginia, most of you have probably enjoyed the brilliant night sky. It was so lovely, it held my gaze for a long time. I love the stars and was used to having views even clearer than this when I lived in Colorado. But when I was at school in Alexandria, a person was hard pressed to discern a single star through the flood of artificial lights. Well-meaning folks, attempting to ensure the safety of suburban dwellers, have worked hard to reduce darkness in every inch of the city. But, with all that fabricated visibility, what is real, what is true, the stars that exist beyond the sight of human eyes, is lost from view.

In a world flooded with media, where propaganda and political ideology saturate everything, it is easy to be fooled into believing that whatever we see is the truest thing. With the artificial light of persuasive influences vying for our attention, we cannot always see the realities beyond. Sometimes, the only way to see clearly, is to follow God away from the outside influences and allow God to reveal what is genuine and enduring.

Today's collect prays "Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure." I am not sure we could ask for a timelier prayer. But, as much as we would all like to be less anxious, we do live among things that are passing away. Life is mutable, it is always changing and that is typically not something that relieves our anxiety. Which is why the prayer itself is so poignant. Eternal things do endure. But our earthly treasures make us feel safe when the world is always changing. To allow ourselves to trust God with our treasures requires us to be clear-sighted. The best thing we

can do when our anxiety threatens to overwhelm us is to follow God away from world's artificial lights and gain a fresh vision for the certainty of eternal things.

As we search for clarity, today's texts begin by making one thing very clear. God is an advocate for the marginalized. Through Amos, God pronounces judgment on those who "trample the needy and bring to ruin the poor". Our Psalm promises that God "takes the weak out of the dust and lifts the poor out of the ashes". And in our epistle, alongside Paul's admonitions to pray for those in the highest positions of power, he tells us to pray for every single person. In fact, Paul's prayers for the powerful are intended to lead the nations' leaders into providing peaceful lives for everyone, especially the marginalized whose resources lack the ability to protect their own peacefulness.

Our world's systems tell us that the poor are irrelevant, a nuisance. The bright floodlights of the world teach us to believe the poor should be disposed of and silenced. Worse still, they terrify us with the danger of identifying with the plight of the marginalized because we do not want to become like them. We are warned away from these helpless ones, and our anxiety is stirred to believe their very existence is threatening to us. The messaging under this artificial light is to create and expand our own wealth so that we can avoid the plight of the poor, and to resist providing for their needs in any meaningful way if it means sacrificing our own rights and privileges.

All of that is clear, and while it might be difficult to swallow, it is at least straightforward. Now, let us move away from clarity and dive into the ambiguity that is our gospel text.

This parable is located as a bridge between two sections in Luke. We have been reading for weeks about God's extravagant grace through parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. In today's reading, Jesus turns his attention to wealth and stewardship, contrasting the ways of the world with the priorities of heaven. To understand this story, let us name the players. There is a rich man. Jesus never uses rich folk as the heroes of his stories, so keep that in mind. Character One- Rich man; signal bad guy.

Character two- the dishonest manager of the rich man's estate. Character three – the slew of people who are in debt to the rich man.

There are two additional things we need to understand about this story. The first is a glaring problem. Debt is not permitted by the Old Testament Law. No one is allowed to provide loans that accrue interest. Debtors are people without agency because they are enslaved by those who hold their debts; they are exploited and vulnerable to injustice. So, that tells us from the outset that this rich guy really is a bad guy. Not only is he breaking the religious law, but he's also making himself wealthy off his flagrant disobedience. The second is that the way this passage translates the word wealth, riches, and money all come from the same Greek word. If you've been in church long enough to remember Rite One, you will recall this word used to be translated "mammon". We don't use the word anymore, which is a shame, because it doesn't merely mean wealth, it evokes the image of an Old Testament golden idol to which people would literally bow. Mammon is the abundance of possessions to which a human is enslaved; not free to serve God because wealth retains mastery over its servant.

In this story, both the rich man and his manager are accruing mammon and exploiting the powerless... Until the manager gets caught. Once the boss finds out that the manager has been skimming excess for himself, the boss warns of his impending sacking. Before his employment is terminated, recognizing that he didn't have the physical capacity to labor or the humility to beg, he realizes he must do something to save himself. He could not have survived without a job and without friends so; to secure himself socially, he made a brazen choice. He cut the interest off the loans his boss held, freeing people from the oppression of illegal and unjust payments. He made it possible for the debtors to be released from exploitation, pay their debts, and reclaim their freedom. He also made himself appear righteous, by upholding the religious law. When the rich man realized what he had done, he could not renege. Admitting his manager had acted without his approval would have humiliated him socially and he would not have had any power to force

additional payments after the bills had been canceled. The rich man's commendation of the manager was an acknowledgment of his wiliness; it was more of a touché than a pat on the back.

In reflecting on the parable, Jesus condemns dishonesty. However, he affirms the appropriate use of dishonest wealth. In other words, we should not be dishonest people. But we should be wise enough to find creative ways of participating within unjust and dishonest systems. In this story, the manager was just as big a bad guy as the rich man as long as he was exploiting the powerless. But, as soon as he used his position to release the oppressed, he was commended. He started out by being controlled by the power of mammon, but he ended by using money's power to serve the weak.

Jesus says we cannot serve both God and wealth. But that does not mean Jesus wants us to ignore or avoid wealth. In fact, he expresses frustration that his followers weren't better at making use of this world's dishonest wealth for the sake of the kingdom. If the idea of dishonest wealth makes us squirm, it's probably important to remember that most of what we have comes from some form of exploitation. We should not continue to participate in exploitation, but it is a fact of our existence. Our church was built on lands taken from the Manahoac and the Monacan tribes. Most of the clothing we wear was constructed by exploited Asian women and children. And most of our food has been planted and harvested by underpaid migrant workers. God is not surprised that the world is built on unjust systems. Jesus encourages us to find honest and shrew ways to use wealth to empower the poor and build God's kingdom. It is people that endure, not possessions.

May we have the grace to step away from the world's floodlights and into the clarity of Christ who reminds us how to value and act in support of the things that truly endure.