

When we come to church, when we spend time in prayer, when we're alone with our thoughts, following Jesus' Way can seem clear. Hard, maybe, but clear. We're to love, love God and love our neighbor as ourselves, we're even to love our enemies. We're to prioritize forgiveness, take care of one another, and make prayer the foundation of all we do in life. When we're in church, in this sheltered realm, the Way seems clear.

And yet, few of us are able to spend more than this brief time in church each week, a short time in prayer, perhaps, each day. Most of us will spend considerably more time out in the world, navigating all that arises, needing to work, needing to provide for ourselves and our household, needing to navigate other people, with all their needs and expectations – and when we're out there, following Jesus faithfully can feel like a massive challenge.

One of the things that makes it so challenging, without doubt, is money. For some, life is dedicated to the accumulation of money - maximizing profit, ensuring the highest return on investment, growing their personal and corporate wealth; this is, really, what our world has been built for. And so, for the vast majority of people, living in and navigating this world demands constant, dedicated effort and energy to work, to labor, to have just enough. As the cost of living steadily increases and wages, for the most part, stay the same, it's getting harder to stay self-sufficient, to save, harder to protect against unemployment, it's getting harder to hold onto housing, to live entirely independently.

Right now, in this country, almost 11% of the population have to survive on less than \$32,000 a year, for a family of four people.¹

¹ <https://www.americanprogress.org/data-view/poverty-data/>

And this is an average, the percentage of folks living in poverty is considerably higher for the disabled, for Native Americans, for Black people and for Latinos. We're living in a world that's been built for the worship of wealth and the world's ongoing focus on money is, arguably, one of the great distorting and unrelenting pressures of life.

Navigating life in a world such as this, how can we faithfully follow Jesus when we step out of these doors, when the pressures and realities and expectations of life bear down on us?

Today's Gospel reading is notorious for being near impossible to adequately interpret, so it's unlikely I'll do that today ... but I do wonder whether it's perhaps the complexity of this teaching that's part of what we're to receive; that the complexity of the parable mirrors the complexity of life in the world we live in. It's not straightforward, it's hard to understand, and we can't be sure we've gotten it right.

The manager in our reading today is accused of squandering his boss's property, he's accused. We don't know if this is true, but we do know that the accusation alone is enough for him to lose his job – no due process, no justice required. The rich man has the power and authority and autonomy to do as he likes, act however he likes, because he is a rich man.

Given the realities of 1st century life, the manager in our story would most likely have become destitute without his job, along with all those closest to him who depended on his salary.

When the manager has a job, his family, his household, are fed and housed; if the manager loses his job, then all of them are in serious trouble, their survival's not guaranteed.

He considers his options – he’s not strong enough to dig, to take on unskilled laboring work, perhaps he was an older man, or living with a disability; and to beg, that literally would have been a fate worse than death for most folks in the 1st century. So, realizing these are the two awful choices he’s faced with, the manager opts for a creative third way, he sets out to provide for himself (and his household) by endearing himself to his master’s debtors. By knocking off a substantial amount of what’s owed, not to him, but to the rich man, the manager banks on being able to build some relationships through folks’ indebtedness.

The manager is in a really tough spot. There is no clear way forward, no easy way ahead, there’s no simple solution based on his faith, his values, or ethics. He needs to survive, his household’s survival depends on it. And to survive, he realizes he needs other people.

Sharing this parable with his disciples, Jesus seems to be emphasizing we’re all in this mucky broken mess together, in this world, in this world that serves wealth, we’re all captive to the same system, the rich and the poor; none of us are immune to its impact, although undoubtedly the poor will suffer far more than the wealthy in this life.

And so what do we do, how do we discern right next steps in this imperfect and inherently unjust world. How can we rightly find our way through the pressures and stressors in a world that’s been engineered for the accumulation of wealth. The world’s worship of wealth puts us all on a hard path, has us all confronted by imperfect options, faced with imperfect choices, our capacity and creativity often clipped by anxieties about the future. It’s hard, and life is complicated, for most of us.

Our faith may teach us how we should be, how we should live, but this world doesn't make it easy for us to live out our faith with ease and without reproach. ...

The world as it is depends on us feeling and living as though we are entirely independent of one another; a world that's focused on wealth is a world that lifts up self-sufficiency, and it's a world of competition, division, and violence; it's a world where some are valued more than others for what they have, and money is more highly prized than life.

In his desperate situation, the manager sets about making friends for himself, albeit in a less-than-ideal way, his ethics possibly questionable. What's key to the parable, I think, is that he realizes his life depends on him making these friendships. There's deep truth here: we need each other, always, whether we live like it or not, whether we want that to be the case or not. That we depend on each other for our life is truth, always. Living in a world focused on wealth doesn't change this fact, but it can have us forget it.

Perhaps Jesus is saying that turning to one another, even if driven there by a need to survive, even if the way we get there is 'questionable', turning to one another, realizing we are dependent on one another is good. Perhaps there's no better response to this broken world, no better choice than relationship; perhaps nothing is more profoundly transformative for a human life in this world than understanding we need each other, that our lives are dependent on one another.

And, as we realize our dependence on one another, so we might come to fully realize our utter dependence on God, always present, always life-giving - our independence, our separate-ness is illusory.

And so, perhaps the way forward in faith is, in fact, more simple than the world would have us believe, we just need to choose it.

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