

The Rev. Thomas M. Murphy
St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Owings Mills MD
September 18, 2022

Year C, Proper 20: The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Psalm 79:1-9
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

A Cohesive Renewal

Now, I'm not interested in making anyone feel bad, but if you missed our Renewal Sunday celebrations last week, well, you missed something pretty special.

Thanks to the hard work, dedication, creativity, and generosity of so many of our parishioners and our church staff, we had quite a time here.

The rain did not dampen our joy. In fact, as I ad-libbed last week, the rain actually fit in perfectly with the theme of the day.

After all, there can be no renewal without water – both the water of baptism and the water that falls from the sky and waters the earth, including the new trees planted outside in honor of Rev. Ann and Rev. Caroline.

Several parishioners mentioned that our indoor parish picnic felt a lot like old times – so many of us together, so much joy in the room, enjoying good food and drink – including the tasty frozen desserts served by our own ice cream man, Bob Brennen!

As you can probably guess, the only thing that might have made me happier is if we had a baptism or two!

During the past week, it's been gratifying to receive so much positive feedback about the day – how beautiful the music was, how great the Sunday School

room looks, and how appropriate it was that we had a service project, creating gift bags for the hardworking teachers at Owings Mills Elementary School.

My favorite comment came from a parishioner who said that the whole day was “cohesive.”

I love that because that was exactly the idea – that the theme of “renewal” would pervade our entire day, from our worship to the party, just as we hope and pray that God will renew our entire church, that God will renew our entire world, that God will renew our entire lives.

A cohesive renewal.

After such a great day last week, I would have really liked today’s gospel lesson to be the kind of Bible passage that would make our hearts sing.

But, instead, we are given one of Jesus’ most difficult and troubling parables, a real head-scratcher that’s sometimes called the Parable of the Dishonest Manager.

We’re told that there was a rich man and this rich man has been informed that his manager has been “squandering his property.”

We don’t know exactly what this “squandering” was – and, for that matter, we don’t know for sure if these charges are even true – we can all imagine scenarios where someone might come up with a false accusation to get rid of the manager.

But, guilty or not, the manager sees the writing on the wall.

And he knows himself well enough to know that he’s not cut out for manual labor and he’s too proud to beg.

So, thinking and moving fast, the manager goes to a couple of people indebted to the rich man and slashes what they owe, hoping that when he's out of work and out of a home, they will look kindly on him and help him out.

Exactly what's happening here is unclear.

It could be that the manager is eliminating his commission – which wouldn't be dishonest – or maybe he's falsifying the rich man's records, which, uh, would be dishonest – true to the character a manager who had been “squandering” the rich man's property.

But then things take some unexpected turns.

First, the rich man *commends* the manager for his shrewdness.

That's hard to figure out.

But, even more puzzling, Jesus seems to approve as well, suggesting that if his followers – “the children of light” – are shrewd like the manager then we will be welcomed into “the eternal homes.”

OK.

Well, since we've read other parts of the Bible, we can be sure that Jesus is not teaching us to cheat or to be dishonest!

But, I think that this rather confusing parable is another way for Jesus to say that his disciples should be “as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves.”

We live in a world of limited resources, a world of dollars and cents, a world where our budgets – our personal budget – our church budget – our national budget – are all in fact moral documents, revealing what we truly value, and what we don't value very much at all.

We need to be savvy with what we have – to not squander and certainly not cheat like the manager may have – but use our resources carefully, building wealth so that we can do the most good that we can.

And, this week's news provided a real-life example of what Jesus might have in mind for us: the outdoor clothing company, Patagonia.

Since it was founded by a counter-cultural rock climber Yvon Chouinard in 1973, Patagonia has been in the lead in using organic materials, providing day care for children of employees, and being good caretakers of the environment.

Not being outdoorsy myself, I don't think I've ever bought or worn a Patagonia product, but people seem to really like their stuff because the company has been hugely successful, making its founder a billionaire, apparently much to his dismay.

Just recently, he and his family worked out a complicated plan to transfer their ownership of the company, worth about \$3 billion, to a trust and nonprofit organization.

Putting this together took a lot of shrewdness – I don't pretend to understand it all – and some skeptics think it's just a clever way for the family to avoid a big tax bill, but it sure looks like this clever family has sacrificed great wealth to ensure that Patagonia will stay true to its principles, using all of its profits to fight climate change and protect sensitive lands around the world.

So, I don't know if the skeptics are right or not, but the positive interpretation of what they're doing really is like what Jesus has in mind: be clever and make money, yes, sure, but then use that wealth for good.

So, next Sunday will be the start of our Stewardship Campaign here at St. Thomas'.

And, you know that this place has been long blessed with significant financial resources, and at least as important, we're also blessed with savvy and clever people who take good care of what has been entrusted to us, allowing me to sleep quite well, actually.

I won't be preaching next week, so I want to say this today:

My hope is that the cohesive renewal that is happening at St. Thomas' will include all of us taking a prayerful and thoughtful look at our budgets, our budgets which tell us what we really value and we don't value all that much.

My hope is that our cohesive renewal will include us reflecting on just how blessed we are, how much we have to be grateful for.

In my case, especially after last week, I'm not kidding when I say that I've got to be the most fortunate priest in the Episcopal Church!

And I hope that our cohesive renewal will inspire us to be as generous as we can with this amazing church, moving us beyond depending so much on the wealth left behind by others, renewing the sense that this is our church and we are responsible for taking care of it, providing the resources to do the work that God has

given us to do, providing the resources for the future ministries that God is preparing for us as we speak.

So, may God continue to renew this old church.

May God give us the gift of a cohesive renewal.

Amen.