

Yr. C, Proper 20
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Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
Christ Episcopal Church
1633 Words

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

Every airplane pilot knows the ‘50/70 rule.’ It is an important safety rule, and yet, sometimes...it’s just not going to help you at all. I’ll explain a little more about that later, because this also pertains to the life of faith...at least the kind of faith that Jesus taught.

Sometimes I wish Jesus had taught an easier type of faith, the kind of faith I could control or...at least manage all by myself. Trust does not always come easy, does it?

Well, Jesus once told a story about this.

Once upon a time there was a man who was put in charge of a lot of property that did not belong to him. It was his job to manage it. And it was not easy. This man was a little past his prime, physically speaking. In other words, he was not cut out for physical labor in a different kind of job. He was also too proud to beg.

Gee, I wonder what that feels like! Do you sometimes wonder—as I do—if the Sunday lectionary is picking on you? I was reminded again last week during our move from Greenville that I am not cut out for too much physical labor. I’m definitely too proud to beg. And I have been put in charge of a lot of property that does not belong to me.

“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly...” This is our opening prayer today, and it is perfect as we begin a new chapter of ministry in this special place—a time of healing, a season of grace—as we hold fast to the love of God, which endures through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

To love things heavenly means devoting ourselves to the Source of our life, and—thereby—being strengthened by God’s lively, loving Holy Spirit in order to love our neighbors as much as ourselves.

In 1993, my wife—Kim—and I traveled deep into the Ecuadorian jungle to visit a little lodge built out of bamboo, perched above the ground next to the Napo River, the headwaters of the Amazon. The way you get there (in case you might be interested in going) is that you board a small plane in Quito and fly to the tiny village of Coca where you climb into a dugout, motorized canoe for the rest of the way. It’s simple!

At least it seemed simple...until it was time to return to Quito. After a few delightful days and nights we took a dugout canoe back to Coca, walked over to the small, sandy, dirt strip-of-a-runway. (I wouldn’t really call it an airport.) The only thing sitting there next to the palm trees was an old, large, camouflaged C-130 cargo plane belonging to the Ecuadorian Air Force.

“How in the world did this huge plane land on this tiny patch of dirt?” I wondered. Meanwhile, Kim was already asking herself the more relevant question. “How in the world is this huge plane going to *take off* on this tiny patch of dirt...and is there any possibility we could just call a taxi who would be willing to drive us 9 or 10 hours back to Quito?”

This! This is what the manager felt like—you know, the one in Jesus’ parable. He was completely stuck. He could feel the heavy weight of the difficulty and danger of his situation. The manager didn’t have any good options. Frankly, the manager did not even have any bad options. He only had one, terrible option. He had to depend upon the mercy of God and of other people.

This parable is commonly called ‘The Parable of the Dishonest Steward.’ I don’t like that title. It presumes only one interpretation of the parable—that it’s primarily about the dishonesty of the steward. And we know this is wrong, because Jesus, himself, offers more than one interpretation in his own comments about the story!

I believe this parable—like most of Jesus’ parables—is more about God than it is about people. We’ll come back to that in a bit.

There was no taxi cab, y’all. I don’t remember there even being a telephone in that village to call one. A man in uniform walked over to us. “*Billetes, por favor.*” (Tickets, please.) We showed him our commercial airplane tickets, and he pointed us toward the giant, open cargo door at the tail of the plane.

Kim and I walked up the ramp and stood in that huge empty cavern. There were no seats. There were no smiling flight attendants. A guy in his military fatigues came over, speaking Spanish words I did not know, more rapidly than I could possibly understand.

He was unable to tell us how to secure ourselves into the ‘sideways-hanging nets’ along the left wall of the cargo bay, so he showed us. He sat in the net, swaying back and forth, and clicked a couple of buckles. Then he hurriedly grabbed our backpacks and secured them to the wall.

We were stuck...utterly dependent upon the mercies of God, mediated through other people—people we didn’t know...people we could not even understand.

The reason I think we are tempted to focus on the ‘so-called dishonest steward’ in this parable is that we don’t want to seriously put ourselves into this very uncomfortable situation that Jesus is talking about. When were you last stuck—utterly dependent upon the mercies of God or ...the mercies of other people?

The kind of trust to which Jesus calls us is profound, which also means...it is not easy. “Too weak to dig; too proud to beg...what are you going to do?” This is the challenging question Jesus presents to us this morning.

The cargo door slowly lifted up until it closed with a dull thud. “Hmm. Did that shut securely?” Some lights came on. There were several airmen buckled into the net seating across from us. As the four noisy engines came to life and the propellers began to spin, each soldier made the sign of the cross.

It was—for them—a sign of faith. I misinterpreted it as a sign of fear. “What do they know that I don’t know?” I wondered. “Are the odds of a successful takeoff worse than I’ve imagined?”

Faith or fear. What do you choose when the odds appear long, and the challenges seem difficult or dangerous? This, I believe, is what Jesus is challenging us to consider. Faith or fear.

The rich man in this parable represents God. “Praise God from whom *all blessings* flow.” Y’all, the Creator of all things is not really worried about 50 jugs of olive oil or 20 containers of wheat. Our Creator wants to see us *do something* with the property we are managing. Our God wants to see us *do something* with the gifts we have been given. Jesus praises the manager in his parable because he built relationships. And relationships matter more than property. People matter more than property.

So, *do something* with all that *you* have. Do it for the glory of God. Do it for the blessing of your neighbors—whom Christ taught us to love. And *trust* that there is enough love to go around...when we share it.

The 50/70 rule is this: it's when a pilot checks the airplanes' ground speed during takeoff. If you have not achieved 70% of the speed you need for takeoff and there's only 50% of the runway left; you abort...you kill the engines so that you'll have room to stop the plane.

Well, when you're in the cockpit of a large C-130 on a tiny airstrip in the jungle, I suspect there's really just one option. You've got to give it all the power you've got. You pour it on with an unswerving determination to lift off, no matter what.

What I remember from inside that large fuselage is that the plane was lurching and heaving in place. The half dozen of us seated in those nets were swaying rhythmically because the pilot was turning up the full power of the engines *and* holding the brake. He was maximizing the torque. He was going to make great use out of every last inch of that short, dusty runway.

Suddenly, he popped the brake loose. We were all slung toward the back of the plane in those nets. I've never experienced takeoff power anything like that. And then it increased even more. Seconds later, there was a beautiful, lifting sensation as we left the ground.

Dear people, we are given a limited runway in this life, *and also* more power than we often realize that we have. We have the power of a magnificent Creator, the Source of life in whose image we are made! We have the power of a compassionate Redeemer, making it possible for us begin anew—each day! And we have the power of God's lively, loving Holy Spirit—within us and around us!

What shall we do now with all of this marvelous power in our lives? What might we do with all of the property of which we are stewards? How will we share the bountiful gifts we have received?

I want you to know that I'm not observing the 50/70 rule. I'm like the pilot of that C-130. I'm going to give this ministry all the power that I've got. I hope you will too.

A small group of us “popped the brake loose” this week, and—by God's grace—we are taking off this morning. Thank you for being on board today!

Now, together, let's *do something*...something full of love for the glory of God. Together, let's try to trust the teaching, the example, and the mercy of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.