

Luke 16:1-13
St. Andrew's, Nogales

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In first century Mediterranean society a person's social status was considered a given. You were born into a certain status, and remained in it throughout your life. The concept of limited good held by most common people (kings and representatives of the Roman empire and those who made money through trade and usury excepted) meant that you did not try to raise your social status through overt accumulation of wealth. Each person did, however, try to maintain their honor and their inherited status.

First century men maintained their status in two ways, the first being through having reciprocal relations with others of similar status, helping each other out when needed, but never repaying the other exactly, which would mean the end of the relationship.

People also maintained status through forging relationships with others of both higher and lower status. Those who had less access to goods and services would try to maintain relationships with one or more people who did so as to be able to appeal to such patrons in times of need.

Those who had access to more goods and services also had an interest in maintaining relationships with clients who needed their help because to help them was to play a role in the maintenance of the overall status quo. Those whom you helped praised your name, and you would become known as someone who did not step above his position by accumulating wealth at the expense of others.

The hardest situation for anyone in a society based on limited good was to be unable to maintain their inherited status, no matter what that status was. If you were unable to maintain your status in life you were considered poor and you were pitied.

I've given this anthropological background so as to help us understand today's lesson from the Gospel of Luke. Because for a twentieth century North American, this passage doesn't make much sense, does it? How can someone who cheated his master receive praise from that same master?

Our story from the Gospel of Luke is one Jesus tells about a manager who worked for a rich man. The rich man heard charges that his manager was squandering his property, so he called him in to fire him and asked him for an accounting of his management.

Well the manager was really in a bind because he knew he would be unable to maintain his status as someone who managed other people's property. To become a day laborer or a beggar and lose his status in society was unthinkable.

So the manager decided to establish relationships with people who could help him keep his status and even invite him to their homes. He began to finalize the accounts that clients had with his master. He summoned those who were indebted to his master one by one and reduced their debt, writing down a lower figure for each one, fifty jugs of oil or eighty containers of wheat rather than a hundred of each, for example.

And then in an action that confounds us modern North Americans the rich master commends the manager for acting shrewdly. In first century Mediterranean society what the manager did could actually be considered a win-win situation, because he made both himself and his master look good, not only to his master's debtors, but also to others in their community.

"How did the manager do that?" we might ask.

The debtors, you see, were now indebted to the manager because he had forgiven good portion of their debt. The manager would now be able to maintain his own reciprocal mutually beneficial relationship with each of them and even be welcome in their homes.

Ah, but the master was a very smart man also!

He publicly commended the manager and thereby made himself look good to others as someone who did not exploit those who owed him something. The clients whose debts were reduced would continue to maintain their relationships with their old patron also. If the manager

had demanded payment in full it would have ended their reciprocal relationships with his master.

And what is Jesus' comment about this story he tells? That the people of the world demonstrate an astuteness from which the children of light can learn. Be shrewd in the work of the kingdom, Jesus said. I might interpret that to mean to be realistic, to be able to assess a situation correctly and act accordingly for the good of the kingdom.

As many of you know I spent several days earlier this week serving as an interpreter for a number of our Episcopal Bishops who visited the border in Cochise County before going on to attend the House of Bishops meeting in Phoenix. The thirty-five or so Bishops came from all over the United States, from California to Connecticut, from the upper Midwest to the southeast. They came to broaden their perspectives on border issues, so much in the news today.

The Border Program Group of the Diocese worked to present them with people working both sides of the border to improve the local people's lives and to help migrants in need.

The Bishops went across in five vans, two of which went to Agua Prieta and three of which went to Naco. They visited churches supporting neighborhood projects, such as feeding school children. One church had recently set up a computer lab with internet access for kids to use after school. They visited the DIF in Naco, the social service agency which serves pregnant women and children. They visited the Just Coffee roasting operation in Agua Prieta, They also visited centers, which aid migrants, especially those who have been bussed back across the line after having been caught, and who have few resources left. One group also visited the local Border Patrol station. One group they did not meet with, of course, were the local drug traffickers!

On Tuesday evening the Bishops also listened to and questioned a panel of local people including the chief of police, the head of the Tucson Sector of the Border Patrol, a local rancher, a local physician from the hospital who treats injured or dehydrated migrants, the

border missionary from the Presbyterian Church and a human rights activist from Border Action Network.

They came away with a better understanding of the complexity of the border region and the complexity of the migrant issues and the drug trafficking issues also.

But I think what most surprised the Bishops was to find that the border is a place of encounter of two peoples, two nations and two cultures and that there is much cross border cooperation in dealing with many issues.

To give a local example of cross border encounter and cooperation, on my return on Wednesday, I, along with a number of other members of St. Andrew's who work with the St. Andrew's Children's Clinic, attended a celebration of the bicentennial of Mexican Independence and the centennial of the Mexican revolution at the Mexican consulate. The evening included the telling stories of some of the heroes of the independence movement beginning with Father Miguel Hidalgo who uttered his famous cry for the independence of Mexico in the town of Dolores in the early hours of September 16, 1810, in front of his parish church. It also included a live broadcast of the celebration in the Zocalo, the huge central square in Mexico City, with the President Calderon's repetition of the cry and the most amazing fireworks and light show I have ever seen. And there was a plentiful supper and music and dancing.

But most important to those of us at St. Andrew's, here on the border, was the awarding of a special prize to Coca Romero, one of the founding mother's of the Children's Clinic which this church has hosted for some 37 years. It takes volunteers from both sides of the border, doctors, therapists, interpreters, cooks and cleanup people, donors and fundraisers, to keep the clinic treating some 250 to 300 children each month. And it involves hospitals on both sides of the border, which treat patients referred by the clinic. The clinic is an outstanding example of cross border cooperation and encounter, and it was wonderful to have Coca honored by the consul on such an important day!

Our Episcopal Bishops talked about how they experienced the border as a place of encounter, and a number of them emphasized that we need to move forward dealing with the many issues in faith, not in fear.

That is the message I believe they will take back to their dioceses. And by moving forward in faith, not in fear, may we in the Episcopal Church advocate for a comprehensive immigration policy based, not on an ideology of fear, which is pervasive in this country today, but in faith, based on a clear, and shrewd, understanding of the issues.

Let us never forget that all of us who live in this wonderful place of encounter here on both sides of the border are the children of God and that our baptismal covenant calls us to respect the dignity of each and every human being.

Amen.