<u>Waters that Never Run Dry</u>

On this beautiful morning in midst of the Season of Creation, we celebrate Ingathering. We return from travels to greet old friends, welcome new ones, and rejoice that the long isolation enforced on us by the pandemic appears to be ending. We look forward to relief from the heat, dust and drought that have plagued us all summer. So, in honor of this very special occasion, the lectionary has given us what may be the single most perplexing parable in all four of the Gospels. Never let it be said that the Holy Spirit lacks a sense of humor.

Today's Gospel passage picks up almost where we left off last week. I say "almost," because the lectionary skips the story of the Prodigal Son, going straight into what is commonly called the Parable of the Unjust, or Dishonest, Steward. There, we run into a disconnect. The steward, who is responsible for managing a rich man's affairs, doesn't start out unjust or dishonest. He's charged only with squandering his employer's property. The rich man, hearing of the steward's wastefulness, demands an accounting of his management and fires him. That demand gives the steward a lifeline. He calls in the rich man's debtors and cuts their debts, hoping that they'll take him in when his employer kicks him out. *Now* the steward has become dishonest. We might expect the rich man to be furious, or even to have the steward thrown in jail, but he doesn't. Instead, he commends the steward for being so shrewd. Go figure.

This parable has no heroes. The rich man is cruel enough to fire the steward based solely on rumor. The steward, facing homelessness and starvation, has reason to fear, but we can't exactly applaud as he rips off his employer. Even the debtors aren't poor peasant farmers whom we might pity. Debts this large would only have been incurred by rich landowners who could readily repay what they owe. And yet, the debtors seem happy to benefit from the steward's fraud. In this parable, shrewd self-interest is universally valued – loyal, honest service is not.

Jesus is ostensibly teaching his disciples here, but he's still in the presence of the Pharisees and scribes who criticized him last week for dining with tax collectors and sinners. They're eavesdropping on his every word, and I believe he tells this parable primarily for their benefit. Jesus's friends may frequently blunder but, with one notable exception, they're neither dishonest nor unjust. When Jesus says "you cannot serve God and wealth," the disciples may not learn much, but the powerful, well-to-do Pharisees and scribes would be wise to listen.

This parable is difficult. Some Bible scholars struggle to explain why Jesus seemingly praises the steward's dishonesty; others see this parable as Jesus's instructions on what to do with wealth in a fallen world. St. Augustine thought that Jesus told this story to encourage us to use our earthly wealth to pave our way into Heaven. As Augustine observed, "[the steward] was insuring himself for a life that was going to end. Would you not insure yourself for eternal life?" Pope Francis concurs, stating that "wealth is good when it is placed at the service of our neighbors; otherwise, it is unjust." Jesus would almost certainly agree.

Perhaps it's the Season of Creation at work but, as I read and reread today's Gospel passage, I kept thinking not about wealth, but about water. The financial industry relies heavily on water metaphors to explain how money works. Economists talk about "liquidity" and cash "flow," letting markets "find their level," lamenting when sources of capital "dry up," and promising that economic benefits will "trickle down," or a "rising tide will lift all boats." Money and water are very different in at least one respect, however. Money is a human invention. Water comes from God, and it's far more valuable than money could ever be.

Water is essential to all life on Earth. According to Harvard biologists Molly Sargen and Daniel Utter, water makes up anywhere from 60-75% of our body weight. We can go up to three months without food, but can't survive more than three days or so without water. It's the

essential element that supports cellular structure, dissolves toxins and sustains vital biological processes like photosynthesis. Where there is no water, there can be no life.

Water is fundamental to our Christian faith as well. Even before God made the world, the Spirit moved "upon the face of the waters." The waters parted for Moses, allowing God's chosen people to escape enslavement. The Psalmist sings that God, our Good Shepherd, leads us beside still waters. Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink of water, then promises her living water that will protect her from ever thirsting again. And, to quote our baptismal liturgy, Jesus received baptism by water from John the Baptist and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah who leads us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. Our own baptism marks us as Christ's own forever. Water is very powerful.

Because water is so essential to life, access to clean water should be the God-given right of every living thing. But climate change is disturbing weather around the world, deepening drought and escalating rainfall beyond anything in living memory. Lakes are shrinking and rivers are running dry in many parts of the world, while unprecedented floods are destroying homes and agriculture elsewhere. Here in Annapolis, flood warnings have become so common that they hardly feel like emergencies. And as we've seen most recently in Jackson, Mississippi, the poor – disproportionately people of color – are hit hardest when climate change overwhelms our water systems. But in our hyper-commercial culture, our response to shortages is to commodify water. Bloomberg recently reported that California's drought has raised the spot price of water to as much as $2,000 per acre foot. Commodity traders may see the rising price of water futures as an opportunity, but it's a catastrophe for those who are already struggling to get by.

If the Parable of the Unjust Steward instructs us to use our earthly wealth to make friends in Heaven, equitably sharing water is a great place to start. The steward who wasted his

employer's assets can teach us not to waste water, but to conserve it and keep it clean. St. Luke's can be proud of our own Restoration of Nature project, which cleans polluted wastewater from the streets before returning it to the Chesapeake Bay. It's a beautiful example of good water stewardship; it's also proof of how much a small congregation can accomplish when dedicated to serving our God.

And we can do still more. We can fulfill our baptismal vow to strive for justice and peace among all people by speaking up, insisting that water's importance to people everywhere be recognized and respected. I believe that we, the baptized children of God, are called to speak out against hoarding and commodifying water. Instead, we can and must affirm that all of God's creatures are entitled to their fair share of this precious, lifegiving resource.

We refilled our font with holy water this morning, so everyone who wants to can bless themselves with water as we enter and leave our chapel. We'll refresh the water before each service, and monitor covid levels to protect our church family. But whether anyone touches the water or not, may it be a gentle reminder to each of us of our own baptism and our baptismal covenant with our Creator. This morning, let's give thanks for our ready access to clean water, and for the beauty of the rivers and Chesapeake Bay that make living in and around Annapolis such a delight to the eye. Let's pray, as the author of 1 Timothy urges, for all who are in positions of power to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth, so that everyone "may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and dignity." Above all, as we regather, let's rejoice, knowing that we have passed through the living waters of baptism that never run dry, becoming and remaining faithful members of the community of Christ, bathed in his love. Welcome home, saints. *Amen*.