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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Amos 8:4-7, Luke 16:1-13

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon about the joy of the consecrated life — the kind of life about which we just sang in the sermon hymn:

Take my life, that I may be  
consecrated, Lord, to thee;  
take my moments and my days;  
let them flow in ceaseless  
praise.(LBW 406)

The text I especially desire to lift up for us today comes from First Peter Chapter 1, and it speaks of joy:

[Jesus Christ], Whom having not  
seen, ye love; in whom, though now  
ye see him not, yet believing, ye  
rejoice with joy unspeakable and full  
of glory.(1 Peter 1:8, KJV)

And so, this morning I wish to speak of Christian joy. But there are miles to go before getting to this happy subject, because first of all, we need to deal with this morning's parable of the Unjust Steward. It is a parable about the dreariness of idolatry, especially the misery of giving our hearts away to money. Then, after that we will turn to the happier theme of Christian joy.

From the point of view of Christian morality, the key verse for interpreting this strange parable is the last verse of our reading:

No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.(Luke 16:13, KJV)

I refer to this morning's parable as a "strange" parable because there does not seem to

be a saint in sight. In fact, I wonder if our Lord's attitude toward the characters in his own parable is not simply, "a plague on all your houses." Take the manager, for example. He does not fall into sin in this parable: he is already there! He is an "unjust steward" from the beginning. That is why he is being fired. And in the course of the parable, he compounds his sin by his manipulations with the debtors — the way he tries to win their favor by permitting them to slash their bills. Thus, the manager piles cheating on top of cheating, bamboozling his employer more than ever.

And what of those debtors? There does not seem to be a righteous one among them. They are all complicit in cheating the rich man. So, the manager comes along, encourages them to benefit themselves by misrepresenting what they owe, and they respond, "Amen! Alright! What a cool idea!"

As for the rich man, he participates in a category of Israelite about whom the Bible has some misgivings. The Bible's attitude toward rich people is ambivalent. On the one hand, there are rich people in the Bible who are good people. Abraham was wealthy, Job was wealthy, Solomon was certainly wealthy, and in the New Testament, Mary Magdalene might have been wealthy. On the other hand, sometimes the Bible looks askance at the rich because some of them became rich by exploiting the poor. We read about that in this morning's lesson from Amos:

<sup>4</sup>Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end, <sup>5</sup>saying, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, <sup>6</sup>that we may buy the poor

for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the refuse of the wheat?”

That is, the Bible knew all about unjust weights and measures, about crushing loan terms, about misrepresenting value and thereby depriving poor people of their meager resources.

Indeed, I have read that to the poor people of that generation — the generation of the early church — the natural heroes of the parable would have been the debtors. The early readers of the parable would have assumed that the rich man got what he deserved because he had been overcharging the debtors in the first place, perhaps hoping to drive them to bankruptcy and then to take their possessions.

And even if that is not so, still the rich man in the parable expresses a strange morality because he commends the manager for his cleverness in ripping him off. Well, clever or no, one ought not to go around praising injustice.

Furthermore, I think I detect a tone of weariness in the preaching of Jesus about this parable. Consider his conclusion to this parable:

<sup>9</sup>And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

What kind of advice is this? Make friends for yourselves “by means of dishonest wealth” so that when it is gone, they may welcome you “into the eternal homes.” Since when do any of our friends — good or bad — have the authority to welcome us “into the eternal homes”? Questions of eternity are up to God, not to friends we have made by way of dishonest wealth.

Do you see what I mean? There is hardly a saint in sight, and our Lord’s attitude seems to be one of weariness with the whole kit and caboodle of this world’s business as usual.

Now, isn’t that a thought? That our Lord Jesus could ponder much of the ordinary stuff of life and find it dreary? That our Lord could ponder *People* magazine and *Money* magazine and the home page for AOL and find them dull

and unworthy of Christian reading? That Jesus could glance at the ordinary passions and preoccupations of life and think to himself, “They’ll never get you to heaven!”?

I mean, if parents can glance at the ways of life of their teenagers and be discouraged thereby, why cannot Jesus paint some picture of wheeling and dealing between a rich man, an unjust steward, and complicitous debtors, and yield the great summary statement:

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.(Luke 16:13, RSV)

But there is another way to put all this. There is a more positive way. It concerns that joy of which St. Peter wrote — that joy which is “unspeakable and full of glory.” And it accords with the happy saying of Jesus that he came that we might have life:

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.(John 10:10, KJV)

Let me begin this discussion of Christian joy with an observation about St. Peter’s phrase, “joy unspeakable and full of glory.” The interesting thing about this phrase is that the apostle is writing to a persecuted folk. In fact, the immediate context for Peter’s words about joy is suffering:

That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.(1 Peter 1:7, KJV)

St. Peter, you see, is writing to the persecuted churches of Asia Minor. The churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia,

and Bithynia are experiencing troubles that the apostle likens to being “tried by fire.”

And so, when the apostle speaks of “joy unspeakable and full of glory,” he does not mean that everyone is having fun. No, rather he speaks of a joy that can dwell alongside this world’s frustrations and even sufferings.

And so, when I speak of Christian joy, I do not necessarily mean that your neighbors will suddenly stop making all that noise, your employees will suddenly start working better, your contracts will flow more smoothly, your aching bodies will suddenly find peace, or that one in your life who is breaking your heart will suddenly repent and mend his ways, mend her ways.

Rather, I speak of a joy that is available to you regardless of what else is going on in your life. I mean a joy that cannot be taken from you, cannot be stolen from you. The simplest way I can think to phrase this joy is this: I speak of the joy of living a good life. I mean the joy of walking with Jesus as best you can. No one can take that joy away from you, and it is the joy that sings with the harmonies of heaven.

I do not deny that there are worldly joys. There are such joys indeed, and may God multiply them on earth. He who “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”(Matthew 5:45) grants joys galore on earth — joys of sociability, sensuality, physical well-being, accomplishment.

But here, I am not speaking of those good and pleasant joys, but rather of a higher kind of joy — of joy “unspeakable and full of glory.” I mean the quiet joy of a day given over to God. I mean the steady joy of walking with Jesus — of being able to lay our heads down at the end of the day and to say, “I did pretty well today. I think that I brought some credit to the name of Jesus. I think that I did a fairly good job today of taking care of my loved ones. I made some progress today on the path of repentance. I drank less, cheated less, I made the ‘ephah and the shekel’ exact, I dealt with honest weights and measures, and now I lay my head down trusting the rest to Jesus. And I am very glad I have Jesus to trust.”

I am speaking of the joy of throwing in our lot with Jesus rather than mammon. And about this, let me share with you a passage from my wife’s sermon this morning up there in the chapel at The Wartburg Retirement Community in Mount Vernon, New York. Because I live with Carol, I get to read her sermons in advance, and so I get to share this fine passage with you.

God or Mammon: We are tempted by money. Of that there is no doubt. We see the effects of greed all around us. Way back in ancient Israel, Amos the prophet was crying out against greed and corruption in the government and the marketplace. Still today that same kind of corruption and greed is the cause of so many problems in our world – poverty, illness, wars, injustice. Sad to say, it is so easy for us to fall into the trap of loving mammon more than we love God and our neighbors.

And yet, I daresay that we here in this community know only too well that money cannot buy you everything. Most of us have lived long enough to know that money cannot buy us another day on this old earth if our health is failing, we have grown old, and the Lord is calling us home. We also know that whatever we have we can’t take it with us! We learn that what is really important in life is to love and to be loved – to have people around us who care for us and care about us. To know that we have used the gifts that God has given us for the benefit of others, as best as we can. And to know that no matter what happens to us – that whether we live or die, as the Bible says, we are the Lord’s, indeed we are so precious to our Lord Jesus that he was willing to share this life that we know – the good and the bad – the living and dying – so that we may never be parted from him.

I believe that another part of St. Peter's "joy unspeakable and full of glory" is this: Be encouraged by your daily deeds of piety. Indeed, be bold to think that these are the things that really count, that really thrill your Lord Jesus, though no one else in the world should care a whit. It is as Luther said concerning the little girl taking care of her mother. He is sure that God is more delighted by the child's piety than by a clergyman in a beautiful church wearing beautiful robes:

For when a priest stands in a gold-embroidered chasuble or a layman remains on his knees a whole day in church, this is considered a precious work that cannot be sufficiently extolled. But when a poor girl tends a little child, or faithfully does what she is told, that is regarded as nothing. (*Large Catechism*, "Conclusion of the Ten Commandments")

You have experience of Christian joy. I know you do. You have memories of stretches of life when you lived the best you could. You have memories of confession, of getting things off your chest, of mending your ways, of prayer, of piety. Return to such ways or continue them strong. Around you, there are people who might criticize you and try to steal away your joy. But set aside such criticisms and this world's chaos, and take some joy in thinking that you are trying to live for God, and he understands and sees, even if no one else does.

The unjust steward supposed that he could find a home through his unjust wheeling and dealing. Maybe he can. But as for you and me, let us aim for honest homes here on earth and heavenly homes in the world to come, through the grace and merit of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.