

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Nov 10th 2017

Memorial of Saint Leo the Great, Pope and Doctor of the Church

Today's gospel parable comes in the middle of a series of Luke's teachings on wealth. This enigmatic narrative is sandwiched between two far more famous narratives – the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The lessons of today's parable are perhaps not as obvious. What can we learn from this dishonest steward?

Like the Prodigal Son, he has “squandered his property” and faces an imminent layoff. This middle manager is a proud man, neither willing to beg nor to sweat for his living. He is likely skimming his own cut in a dishonest economic system in which debtors owe 800-900 gallons of olive oil (!) and 1,000 bushels of wheat (!) to his master. Again like the Prodigal Son, the steward is repenting largely out of self-interest. Namely, he is hedging his bets that his act of restitution will inspire these debtors to treat him with hospitality when he too is out on the streets.

I have just returned from a Creighton immersion in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Here I found many of the same socioeconomic problems we see in today's parable, including extortionary loan interest, corrupt bribery, and an inequitable system in which management and consumers rake in profits and cheap products while factory and farm laborers struggle to eke out a living. Nor am I somehow an innocent bystander. My American government, my American corporations, and my Catholic church have all been key actors in the DR/Haiti drama. During a factory tour, I even realized that the Hanes t-shirt on my back was made in the Dominican Republic!

I was intellectually aware of all of these issues prior to this trip. But meeting people in the flesh sparked a new sense of urgency. Like the steward, I am a cog in a much bigger system that I do not control. But also like the steward, I am called to respond in tangible ways to the injustices that surround me. The steward made his decision. What will we do?

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