

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 22, 2019
Luke 16:1-13

Come Holy Spirit and kindle in your people the fire of your love. Amen.

As I mentioned in a sermon last year, a while back my family got seriously into the TV series *The Walking Dead*. Before watching the show, I never understood the attraction of the Zombie Apocalypse genre, but in recent years it seems to have captured the culture's imagination. There have been countless books, TV shows, movies, and websites devoted to the Zombie Apocalypse. This theme has become so ubiquitous in our culture that a friend of mine told me how her five-year-old son came into the kitchen one day and asked his father whether Jesus had been a zombie since he rose from the dead. Now, *that* conversation is a parent's nightmare! As if resurrection isn't hard enough to explain, without also having to get into how Jesus was or wasn't a zombie!

The Walking Dead begins its story after an unexplained outbreak caused worldwide zombie-ism. The exponentially growing crises causes the collapse of military and law enforcement organizations, and ultimately leads to a panicked breakdown of civilized society. The first few episodes deal with the main character, Rick Grimes, attempting to adjust to this new reality. But what I think makes the show interesting is how it wrestles with the existential issues of what it means to be human and in relationship – what remains of community when civilized structures fail, and what rises in its place?

Those still alive must learn new skills for survival and find their way in a world where the old ethics and way of being no longer seem to work. The complicated struggles of the previous life no longer matter and all one's attention is focused now on the desperate struggle and competition for the basic needs for survival: food, shelter, and basic safety and security. In a world turned upside down, it turns out that it isn't the zombies that are biggest threats to survival – the greatest danger are other people. Fear and the desperate scramble for the limited resources needed for survival bring out the worst forms of human treachery.

It becomes apparent that it is nearly impossible to survive alone in this new world, and groups of survivors band together and form communities. We watch as Rick joins a group and how they struggle to retain the ethics of their prior life and yet adapt them to this new world. We watch as people of all stripes find each other out of necessity and slowly overcome fear and distrust. We watch as complete strangers slowly become family through the trust and relationship that forms from shared risk and experience.

Over and over again, the show keeps coming back to the theme of relationship as the greatest necessity for survival. Walls come down, ammunition runs out, storehouses of food get raided, and even what seem to be the most impenetrable forts have vulnerabilities and eventually fail to protect. It is the trusting relationships with others in community that best ensures safety and any chance of human thriving. These relationships help maintain basic values and ethics that keeps them human. The characters need the others to remind them of what it means to be human, of how to be civilized. At one point in the show one dying character says to another who had been alone and surviving on his own for a long time, [he says,] "Everything is about people. Everything in this life that matters. It couldn't be just me. It shouldn't be just you."

But we see that these relationships must be rooted in more fertile ground than merely fear, coercion, or desperation. Time and over again in the show, we watched as groups tear themselves apart because they were held together only as long as each individual's self-interests shared common ground. Once that slender bridge of shared interest collapses, the community falls apart and each member is at risk. Over time, however, we see Rick's group form true community and faithful

relationships. They call themselves a family, not a group. And that is the difference that makes all the difference.

Our gospel reading today is one of the most inscrutable ones in this lectionary cycle. It seems to beg more questions than give clear answers. Is Jesus really commending dishonest actions? Are we really being told to imitate what, for all purposes, seems to be the dishonest behavior of the main character? And, how do we understand Jesus' teachings that follow in light of this parable?

The composition of this text is also complicated. It starts with a parable, that ends with the Master's surprising commendation of the dishonest manager for his shrewd actions. This is followed by a brief summary of the story and an admonition to do as the manager had done. The text then takes another unexpected turn in which the dishonest practices of the manager then seem to be denounced. And lastly, the final moral of the story is provided, but it seems to be less directly related to the details of this story, than to be a general commentary on the danger of idolizing money rather than God.

But, if I set aside these questions and issues, and look instead at what is underneath this passage, I find a core message of faithfulness and relationship. A message that asks whether we place our faith and trust in God or in our own constructions; whether we seek holy friendships or use each other as means to our own fearful ends. Do we react out of fear, or do we respond out of love?

When faced with financial uncertainty, the manager trusts only in his own cleverness and resources to ensure his security. He discounts the debts not so much a gesture of generosity or a righteous attempt to overcome the unrighteous and unlawful practice of usury, as some scholars suggest. No, this is not a gift or an act of justice. Rather, the manager reduces the debts in order to secure his own self-interests and be welcomed into their homes. The manager, in the face of losing his position and source of money and security, turns to others but uses leverage and obligation instead of faithfulness and relationship.

He trusts not in the economy of love and community, but places his trust in the power of money and manipulation to provide him security. What may seem like a generous act that lightens the debtors' burden, actually is one of manipulation that forces the Master's debtors to reciprocate his supposed generosity and obligates them to him. Moreover, the reduced debts make the Master look generous and benevolent, and make it impossible for him to reverse these actions without looking bad. This was, indeed, a shrewd and clever move.

But, while shrewd, this was not an act of love – it was an act born of fear. And this is a fear that we all might recognize. Fear that comes from when we are backed into a corner and place our trust only in what we can control. Desperate to create a sense of security for himself, the manager relies not on God or upon the strength his relationships within his community, but upon money and his own shrewdness. In doing so, he treats others not as friends, but as objects that he manipulates to serve his needs. This text leads to these questions: Do we serve others in love or coerce them because of the fear born of uncertainty? Are we seeking after homes in this world or striving to serve God and each other in order that we may inhabit our eternal homes? Do we act out of selfish fear, ever seeking to create our own sense of security or do we live in full fidelity to God's call to trust in the One who provides?

Where *do* we place our trust in uncertain times, in wealth and our own resources or in God and each other? And these are uncertain times, indeed. But these have always been uncertain times, that is the very nature of what Jesus calls "this age." Our security, however, is not to be found in wealth, power, and shrewdness, but in our relationships with God and each other. And Jesus has made clear that we serve God best when we serve each other in love.

Ultimately, it all comes down to faithfulness and relationship. True relationship is not one that is bought or manipulated by the economy of fear and false security. Christ calls us to the kind of relationship that emerges out of faithfulness and love – it is about holy friendship that is grounded

in trust in the God who provides all blessings and in the joyful sharing of those blessings so that we may be a blessing to others.

We cannot buy real security, only the illusion of it. We cannot coerce true friendship, only the faintest shadow of it. People may be obliged to reciprocate, but they can't be forced to love. A manipulative reaction out of fear may create bonds of obligation, but only a response in love produces the true friendships that may be found in the community of God – the friends who will welcome you into the eternal homes in the Kingdom of God in the age to come.

Amen.