

**Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 22, 2019**

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Dr. Matthew Daniel Jacobson

Year C, Proper 20: Amos 8:4–7; Psalm 138; 1 Timothy 2:1–8; Luke 16:1–13

About a week ago, I noticed an email in my inbox from LinkedIn and the subject was something along the lines of: “It’s not what you know, but who you know.”

If you aren’t familiar with LinkedIn, it’s an online platform designed primarily for professional networking: finding new jobs, business opportunities, and connecting with other people working in similar fields.

I used to work as a biotech investor and signed up for it about ten years ago, around the time it was becoming popular. The reality, though, is that I’ve never spent much time on it, even when I was working in a field that was perhaps more aligned with that sort of a platform; but, I never cancelled the account either.

When I saw this email entitled, “It’s not what you know, but who you know,” well, I quickly hit the delete button without even looking at it. I did probably roll my eyes a bit first and then hit delete.

Certain images of the business world came to mind such as people moving ahead in their careers based on whom they smoke cigars and drink scotch with, rather than who really might be the best-qualified candidate. I guess most of the time I’d rather it be more about *what you know* than *who*.

But, this was just a gut reaction. Of course, there’s nothing inherently wrong with LinkedIn as a platform, and I’m sure plenty of people use it well, finding new, meaningful, and worthwhile opportunities.

And, there do seem to be a fair amount of people in this sector (that is, the Church) on the platform these days who may very well be putting it to

good use. As with many things in the business world, there are usually two sides to the story.

Of course, LinkedIn didn't exist when Jesus was telling today's parable about the steward of the house that was caught wasting his master's goods. The platform was only launched in 2003. But, there was still some networking going on in today's gospel story, wasn't there?

The steward knows that he's in trouble and has been put into a bit of a crisis when his master learns he has squandered some of the assets that he was managing.

What to do? He's about to be out of both house and job.

We hear the steward think aloud to himself about this crisis he's in. He says he's not strong enough to get a job doing manual labor and doesn't want to be in a position of begging.

And, then he comes up with a rather clever solution. In what must have been a brief window of opportunity, before everyone found out what had happened, he goes to all the people that are in debt to his master and cuts what they owe.

The guy that owes a hundred measures of oil now only owes fifty. A debt of a hundred measures of wheat becomes eighty. And these are significant amounts of oil and wheat. Think along the lines of large-scale commercial businesses. The debt of wheat, for example, would represent the rent owed on a two hundred acre field or twenty times an average family's plot at that time.¹

The steward knows how to work the system.

¹ John Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1993), 35B: 799.

In the first century, with a heavily ingrained culture of reciprocity, the favors he shows by cutting the debts of wheat and oil will certainly be repaid. Presumably, the steward will be able to live for a while as a guest in the debtors' homes once he is kicked out of his master's house.

And, for this, the master praises the steward because he was shrewd and clever. He acted like a master.

But, then, we hear that “the sons of this world are more shrewd . . . than the sons of light.”²

Let me slow down here. The text is implying that the “sons of light,” that is, those following God, aren't being shrewd enough? That seems to be an odd message. But, Luke is trying to connect dots for us. He wants us to know that just as the steward is put into crisis by his master figuring out that he has squandered his assets, so too has the world been put in crisis by the coming of Christ.

The steward knows how to work the system. Do we? His is a cultural system of reciprocity, where gifts and favors must be repaid. So, the question for us really becomes, what is the system within which the “sons of light” are supposed to be working?

We need to know how things work in order to *work the system*, so to speak, if we're to live into being “sons of light.” So, then, it is about *what we know*, right?

But, here's the problem. It really isn't just about *what we know*. It is also about *who we know*. And, the *who* isn't somebody we meet through a business network; it's God. As we come to know God and work within the context of God's system, then things will begin to fall into place.

St. John Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, noted how there were two sides to vineyards, based on how the wine made from the grapes was

² Luke 16:8.

used.³ He was preaching on the scene from Genesis where Noah planted a vineyard and then had a little bit too much to drink from the wine his vineyard yielded.⁴

He doesn't blame Noah for becoming drunk, by the way, and points to how this all was the result of ignorance. Noah is referred to in this passage as "the first tiller of the soil."⁵ Somebody had to be the first to drink too much wine.

But, the point Chrysostom is trying to make is that there is nothing inherently evil about the wine or the grapes or the vineyard. It all depends on what we do with them through the gift of free will. To illustrate this, he points out where wine is most useful for us, alluding of course to the sacrament of the altar.⁶

Just like wine, there are two sides to that LinkedIn platform and two sides to money, or mammon as our gospel text refers to it. It depends on what we do with them.

Mammon is just a word derived from words in Hebrew and Aramaic that could be translated as "money" or "wealth" or "possessions," even if our passage from Luke does personify it a bit by saying that one cannot "serve two masters," both God and mammon.⁷

And, while the text does refer to "unrighteous mammon," it really is getting at how it most often is used by the "sons of this world." And, perhaps, it might be a bit of a literary technique, so that we are jarred to

³ John Chrysostom, *On Genesis*, Homily 29.

⁴ Genesis 9:20–27.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Chrysostom, *On Genesis*, Homily 29.10.

⁷ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 614-615; Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary*, 35B: 805-806.

attention when we hear Jesus tell us to make “friends” via the “unrighteous mammon.”⁸

Most scholars interpreting this passage seem to agree that a key theme underlying it is almsgiving: helping the poor and those in need.⁹

If we know God and how his divine system seems to work, then that all makes sense. Being clever and shrewd with money, according to Jesus, means using one’s mammon and other resources that God has entrusted us with in order to help others.

Now, it was the master of the house and not Jesus that praised the steward for cleverly saving his own hide. And, the example is positioned as one of a “son of this world” and not a “son of light.”

That said, the steward forgave a portion of others’ debts in order to find a new home, or at least temporary housing, after he’s fired.

And, as Jesus puts it, we ought to make good use of our mammon if we are to be received into another type of home, that which he calls in this passage our “eternal habitation.”¹⁰

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and
of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁸ Luke 16:9.

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 3: 248; Nolland, 35B: 806.

¹⁰ Luke 16:9.