Sermon by Rev. Brian Bechtel at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights on September 22nd, 2019.

Back when I was an undergraduate at BGSU, I remember the professor of our Introduction to Philosophy class giving us the famous philosophical thought experiment known as the “trolley problem.” The purpose of a thought experiment of this kind is to tease out what our moral intuitions are, and this is considered to be one of the most basic. So the trolley problem has a few steps to it, and it goes like this: First, imagine that you are walking on a bridge overlooking a train track. There is a train barreling down the track, and you can see that up ahead the track splits, and the train can either veer to the right, or veer to the left. For whatever reason, on this bridge there is a level that controls which way the train will go at the fork. You can see that there is a person tied down on the right side of the track, which is exactly where the train is headed. So the question is, should you pull the lever, and divert the train to the left so that it does no run over the person tied to the track on the right side? In this instance, nearly anyone who is being serious in their consideration of the question will say yes, they think the right thing to do is to pull the lever, so as to save the person’s life.

The second step of the trolley problem has us image a modified version of the first situation. Now, instead of one person being tied on the track, there are now 5 people tied to the track on the right hand track after the split. This is where the train is currently heading. However, on the left track there is one person tied down! And again you are on the bridge, watching this scene unfold, and that same lever is in front of you. Should you pull it?
This is where we will start to see some differences of opinion. Many people will say, yes, in that moment with no other options available, the right thing to do is to pull the lever, and divert the train from the five, causing the death of one person instead. But there is also a dissenting opinion that sometimes emerges; the opinion that one should not pull the lever this time. And for those who feel that way, it’s because they feel that is wrong for them to actively cause the death of someone else. After all, the commandment is “Thou shall not kill,” and not “Thou shall not let die.” Another way to view it is that the dissenter simply desires to be uninvolved. The dissenter does not want to be caught up in the situation at all. They do not want to make a choice. And here, a good professor may push back and tell the student, “Ah, but then you are making a choice. For you were already involved. You saw the situation, you had an option to flip the switch or not. Those were the choices. You can choose not to flip the switch, but you cannot choose not to be involved. You cannot choose not to make a choice. You cannot avoid both killing and letting die. You are caught, and that is the point of the thought experiment.”

A thought experiment tries to remove as many extra elements as possible and focus on a single moral choice (so we don’t have to wonder, say, if the one person tied on the track is a doctor who is on the cusp of curing cancer, for example). In our actual lives, however, the problems that we face are more complex and have many facets of nuance that make it often difficult to sort out what the right action actually is. For example, this weekend we had the Global Climate Strike, with people in major cities across the world demanding meaningful changes from governments and leaders, so that our children and our children’s children might
have a habitable planet to live on in 50 or 100 years from now. But the protesters were not all demanding top down change only, but also encouraging people to avoid the most ecologically damaging activities, such as consuming beef and dairy products, flying, or taking single occupancy trips in the car. I am definitely implicated on that last one. Actually when I moved here I thought I would take my bicycle to church most days, but it turns out that it isn’t really possible because during the day I need to take my car to make pastoral visits. It is just assumed that I will drive myself places, regardless of the needs of the planet. If it were simply up to me to make a personal choice, then I would make it, but as far as the car goes, it is not so straight forward. I am caught in a larger system that involves more elements that me, an isolated individual, make a good or bad “personal choice.” The choice is interpersonal, and is made within a system of forces and powers.

Today’s Gospel lesson, found only in St. Luke’s Gospel, is one that is notoriously difficult to interpret, and there have been various competing readings of it down the Christian centuries. This parable is known as the parable of the dishonest manager, and Jesus praises him and asks his followers to do as he does! It seems like a story about someone who does something dishonest to save his own skin, so how is that compatible with the Christian message, which seems to always be asking us to pick up our cross, to bear the burdens we have been given, to travel the extra mile, to follow Jesus on the road he walked (and we all know what happened to him). How can Jesus commend this self-interested action?

In interpreting this Gospel, it is helpful to keep in mind that this is St. Luke writing, who of the four Evangelists it is he how shows the greatest concern for the
poor and downtrodden. We tend to be more familiar with St. Matthew’s version of
the beatitudes, where Jesus says, “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, for theirs is the
kingdom of heaven.” St. Luke prefers to address actual material poverty in his
version which reads, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of
God.” We also get that clear closing line, “You cannot serve God and money!” The
very next line after the end of the reading gives some context for the story, and is as
follows:

“The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him.”

So, given that St. Luke’s Gospel, with its heart for the poor, and the parable is told in
the context of the rich and powerful, who we are told are “lovers of money,” here is
the way I can see us understanding this parable for our own time.

The manager in the story acted dishonestly. Full stop. And yet in the story,
the rich man commends the manager for his shrewdness, not his dishonesty. We
have Jesus approving of shrewdness, even though it is dishonest. Doesn’t this break
the commandment not be bear false witness against thy neighbor? Sure, on a literal
reading of the law, it does. But Jesus is not about a literal an unthinking obedience
to the Law. Jesus, particularly as portrayed by St. Luke, understands that the
manager exists within a system that is itself cruel and unjust. It is a system that
allows the rich man to get endlessly richer and it made no provision for the poor.

In the parable we hear the inner monologue of the manager. He is too old
weak to dig and ashamed to beg. In other words, he will be left on the street to
starve if he is thrown out. Jesus doesn’t stand for that. Jesus doesn’t say, sure, take
whatever abuses your wealthy boss throws at you, and it is your duty to mindlessly
obey. Jesus understand the law, but he also understand the grey area of the world as it we actually live in.

The injunction by Jesus to make friends by dishonest wealth is to those who already have wealth. He is asking for the wealth to be given away to those in need, and it is for this reason that the Pharisees mock him. Ultimately, this parable has Jesus attacking an unjust system both from below (with compassion shown toward those suffering as workers on the bottom) as well as from above, by telling those with means to make way of it that they may enter, not physical homes as a repayment, but rather “eternal homes” in heaven.

My personal dilemma about whether or not I should be driving is in some respects born of me being part of a system that makes ethical choices unclear. But the teaching in today’s gospel is much clearer when thinking about those struggling at the bottom of society. Think of the person who, upon getting out of prison, tries to find work but after being declined due to background checks over and over, returns to a life of crime. Or perhaps we think of a single mom, who works in a food processing plant (one that is making money hand over fist), and occasionally takes a few things in her purse to feed her kids at home because she is struggling to keep the lights on. Jesus, in our gospel today, is asking us not to make snap judgments using black and white thinking, and to be compassionate with those who are struggling to survive and one step away from being homeless.

If we find ourselves fairly well off, and having no fear of being thrown out to live on the street, perhaps we would be better thinking of ourselves as the rich man, rather than the manager. Even though we certainly work hard for what we have,
what we earn is earned in a system which, just as in Jesus’ day, is oppressive to the poor. In that sense, our own wealth is a dishonest gain that Jesus asks us to rid ourselves of. So we are to be compassionate with those who are struggling, holding back our knee-jerk ethical judgements, and at the same time we are to pass on our wealth to those in need, recognizing its inherent “ill-gotten” nature. In other words, in this parable Jesus teaches us the inherent relationship between compassion and generosity.

Please join me in a concluding prayer entitled, “A prayer of compassion,” by Mother Theresa:

Lord, open our eyes

that we may see you in our brothers and sisters.

Lord, open our ears

that we may hear the cries of the hungry,
the cold, the frightened, the oppressed.

Lord, open our hearts

that we may love each other as you love us.

Renew in us your spirit.

Lord, free us and make us one.

Amen