

“Quiet Quitting, Bold Living”  
Luke 16:1-13 CEB

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If you poll church folks about what their favorite parables told by Jesus are, they would include the Good Samaritan, the lost coin and the lost sheep, the prodigal son...The parable of the middle manager rarely makes the list. It's a complicated parable. If you listened to the scripture reading in one go and said, “Ah yes, that makes perfect sense to me,” then you are already ahead of me. I had to look deeper to get full grasp what was happening. I looked to Biblical scholar Brian McLaren to provide some background and context and credit him for breaking it open in a new way.

McLaren explains that to understand this parable, we need to understand early Palestinian economics. To start with, Romans were occupying Israel/Palestine. As occupiers, they did two things: exploit natural resources and exploit the labor. They did this through a system of taxation where poor people ended up paying the majority of taxes.

In early Palestine, the rich people lived in the south, where Jerusalem was, and poor people lived in the north, where Galilee was. Rich Romans in the south needed the wheat, wine, and olive oil that were produced by the farmers in the north. Romans taxed the northern farmers so much that they couldn't afford to pay their taxes. This inspired southerners of the same culture as the poor farmers to come up north and say, “We've got a deal for you! We'll pay your taxes in exchange for the deed to your property. You can stay on as tenet farmers on our property for the low cost of a percentage of your wheat, wine, and oil.” Then the Southerners would sell this wheat, wine, and oil to the Romans. The rich would get richer, poor would get poorer. It's a tale as old as time.

When the rich southerners would want to get their tribute from northern farmers, they couldn't go themselves because they were so hated by the farmers. They sent mid-level managers, or stewards, on their behalf to say, "Pay up! We need your 30 barrels of olive oil, your twenty measures of wheat." In the parable that Jesus tells, the rich man is mad at the manager because he is not squeezing the farmers enough, not giving him enough return on his investment. The rich man tells the manager, "I'm going to fire you, get the books ready to turn in."

This manager represents middle class folks caught in between rich and poor. He realizes he has no security - he is going to have to be a laborer or beg to survive - he is expendable. This manager decides to switch sides. He gets his return for the rich guy, but in a way that gives a break to the poor. He changes the books so that the rich gets less rich and the poor farmers get more of what they deserved in the first place.

This is a parable about someone who sees the injustice in the system and decides to work for the poor. What I find most interesting about it is, it is someone who works within the system that is set up to do this. He doesn't quit his job or burn down the whole economic system - he transforms from within. This manager looks at his role, his job, and says, "What change can I make? How can I shift my values and my work so that I am on the side of the poor instead of benefitting my rich employer who doesn't see value in me outside of what I provide for him?"

The middle manager in this parable only begins to question the way things work or what value he can bring to his role when his job is threatened. It takes the potential of losing his own livelihood for him to examine his values and to make a change in who he is aligned with and who he is supporting. This parable is told as an encouragement for us to do this same kind of examining *before* we lose the job - to do it as a spiritual practice where we examine questions like, "How does my quest for wealth align me with power? Where are my faith values that call

me to care for the poor and work for justice found in my work? Who am I serving or who is benefitting from my daily actions?"

In the last two and a half years it took a pandemic for many folks to do this kind of questioning. We have ridden a collective wave of a great resignation, hearing stories of people evaluating their life's meaning and purpose and deciding that job where they were just a number or where their work life took over any semblance of a personal life had to go if they were going to live a meaningful life. We have witnessed people switching careers in midlife and later life, preferring to start over to do something where they feel valued and where their work is in line with their values rather than continuing to charge ahead on the path to so called success.

There is a good deal of economic privilege in the great resignation - quitting a job without the next one lined up, or deciding to go back to school or pivot directions all require a certain amount of a safety net lined up - acquired savings, a dual income household that can cushion the blow. Perhaps that reality is why the second phase of the great resignation has just emerged - a phase known as quiet quitting.

On TikTok, videos tagged with Quiet Quitting show a diverse segment of the work force shifting to doing the bare minimum of their jobs. Like the manager in the parable they realize they need their job but that they have been working too hard to benefit someone who doesn't care about them. Quiet quitters are working 40 hours a week instead of 80. They are turning off their email notifications on their phones and only responding during business hours. They are not raising their hands for extra projects or unpaid labor. They are doing their job, but they are not making their job their entire life.

I have always called Quiet Quitting having healthy boundaries, but whatever we call it, I am grateful for a cultural shift where instead of glorifying overworking, we are beginning to

celebrate this shift to examining why we work, who we work for, and how our work benefits the rich or helps us live out our values. Money isn't the ultimate measure of all things. What Jesus calls us to do in this parable is to be in service to relationships rather than use relationships to be in service to money. This parable reminds us that we can love God and follow what God calls us to do in our life, or we can love money. We can't do both. One has to come before the other.

If we find ourselves in the role of the manager, caught between individuals or systems that hold great power or wield great wealth, will we work to help them become more powerful or more wealthy - or will we work to uplift and support those who live under those systems, subverting power to strengthen the poor? Outside of work, how will we use our own wealth or source of power to serve God and not just create more power? How do our spending decisions, the way we use our free time or where we volunteer show a love for God or a love for money?

If instead we find ourselves in the role of the poor farmer, beholden to a system that disenfranchises us, what partnerships are we building and who can we count on as our allies to create change? How are we coming together to subvert systems designed to disenfranchise us?

And if we're the rich land owner? The wealthy boss? The CEO or COO? There is a lesson in here too, because the exploitative system described in this parable only works when everyone participates in it willingly. Perhaps the biggest, quickest change would come if those who hold the power and wealth were to throw a cog in the wheel and stop the whole operation.

This week there was a news story that illustrated something like this happening. The founder of Patagonia, an outdoor clothing company valued at \$3 billion, gave away all of his and his family's shares of the business. Instead of doing it in a way that would give them a tremendous tax break and make them even richer, they did it in a way with no benefit to themselves, using the system to instead support and fund climate change organizations. The

company will continue to operate, but instead of this family accumulating more wealth, the recipients of their hard work will be nonprofit organizations that reflect their values of caring for the earth. The founder, Yvon Chouinard said, “Hopefully this will influence a new form of capitalism that doesn’t end up with a few rich people and a bunch of poor people. We are going to give away the maximum amount of money to people who are actively working on saving this planet.” This sounds like someone who has been studying his parables.

I love this parable because it sheds light on an ancient economic system that mirrors our own and invites us into hard reflections on how we are participating, who we are supporting, and where our loyalty and values lie. Do we love God or do we love money? Are we privileging wealth and power or are we aligning ourselves with the poor?

Brian McLaren says, “God’s economic system invites all of us to lose faith in the system that let the rich do whatever they want and let whatever crumbs trickle down to the rest of us. Everyone matters. Put God at the top. Love God and everything else will have value.” May it be so. Amen.