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Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’

Luke 16:3-4

If it's easy and comfortable for you to do so, I invite you to slip off your shoes and let your feet feel the ground beneath you. Bare feet, with their more than 200,000 nerve endings, are exquisitely sensitive. If you drop a glass on your kitchen floor and it shatters, your feet will tell you, without a doubt, when you've found that shard the broom missed. Or, if you are a parent whose child likes to play with Legos, you know how well your feet can detect a lost brick.

Back when my household included kitty cats, it took no more than a split second for me to know that my tiger-striped cat, Sparkle, had experienced a stomach upset, as she had a knack for leaving her “upset” right in the spot where my feet would land after I swung my legs out of bed. (You never forget what that feels like.)

Medieval castles, intended as fortresses and places of safety, were built with uneven stairs in the stairwells, to throw off and slow down the ascent of attackers, whose feet – like yours and mine – are wired to learn and then come to expect, after just a couple of steps, the height of the next stair.

In the Hindu and Islamic faiths, tradition dictates that worshipers at a temple or mosque remove their shoes before entering. It is a tradition that is, at once, practical and theological. Dirt isn't tracked into a space deserving of respect, and one's bare feet are a symbol of surrender to God. Remember Moses' encounter with God in the book of Exodus, after Moses witnesses the burning bush? God calls to Moses and instructs him to remove his sandals, because Moses is standing on holy ground.

Our sensitive and symbolic feet – the place where our bodies meet the ground – connect us to the world in a way that doesn't generally happen with other parts of our body. But for most of us, most of the time, that connection to ground and earth is mediated by an invention of so many years ago: those bits of leather or rubber or fabric that we call shoes. Shoes keep our feet safe, protected from broken glass or hot pavement, rough gravel or Legos (or whatever the cat leaves at the bedside).

It's a trade-off – we give up sensitivity for safety, cutting ourselves off from information about the ground we walk on in order to prevent injury and discomfort.

Colin Dwyer, a writer and contributor to a podcast called Invisibilia, did an episode where he contemplated the trade-offs that shoes afford us. He talked about hiking in the redwood forests here in California, and how his shoes were doing such a good job for him, allowing him to trudge, as he puts it, “on mud, bugs, roots and who knows what all without feeling much of anything.”

He observed that he might be stepping on insects or other forms of life, and snuffing out that life, or maybe he was only stepping on trash. With shoes, he couldn't tell. Life and death and inanimate objects – everything felt pretty much the same. He noted that, “When we invented footwear, probably some 40,000 years ago, we also slipped a surface between ourselves and the world. With shoes we swapped intimacy (with the earth) for a well-regulated separation. The moment at which we began walking only on objects of our own construction was precisely the same moment that we convinced ourselves the world is of our own making. With shoes came pride, and forgetfulness.” *[from Invisibilia episode, The Secret Emotional Life of Clothes, July 29, 2016]*

That's a lot of heavy meaning to place on inanimate objects like footwear, isn't it? But Colin Dwyer's musings, while ostensibly about shoes, are the stuff of metaphor, pointing to a larger truth, a graver condition: about all the ways that we lose touch with the reality of our interconnectedness — with the earth, with the world, with each other, and with the God who brought all of it into being.

So, with the imagery of groundedness, separation, and interconnectedness in mind, we turn to today's parable – a baffling parable, if ever there was one, in need of some context and understanding of the economic system of Palestine in the time of Jesus.

In that time and in that place, the injunctions and teachings of the Torah ran smack dab into the financial practices of the secular and other religious communities of the time. The Jewish scripture held that the

charging of interest on a debt was an unjust and forbidden practice. If a person was so poor as to need to borrow money or food staples, like wheat or olive oil, they bore enough of a burden just paying back what was owed, without the additional hardship of an interest payment, especially the kind of exploitative and usurious interest rates that were commonly charged.

Rates of 25 or 50% weren't uncommon, and in short order, a somewhat-poor peasant could go from being a small land owner or renter, just barely making it, to being destitute, losing their land along with any way to make a living or pay back their debt.

The rich landowner of Luke's parable is not just a shrewd business person, trying to make a legitimate profit; this landlord is a kind of loan shark, using unjust, unfair means to take land away from the peasants in order to build up his own land holdings.

He's like some of the landowners I learned about when I used to travel with a group from my church in Illinois to rural Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee, to volunteer with an organization called Appalachia Service Project. Appalachia Service Project - "ASP" for short - has as its tagline, "Warmer, safer, drier" and they bring in volunteer work crews to make repairs to the homes and trailers of the poorest of the poor in the Appalachia region. We heard stories about landowners who would get their tenants to apply for house repair help from ASP, and then as soon as the work was finished, they would jack up the rent on the homes so high that the tenants could no longer afford to live there.

The manager in the parable, who works for the landlord, was part of the corrupt system, as well. It's likely that whatever interest rate the landowner wanted to charge, the manager “plussed” that up a fair bit, and skimmed the extra off as his cut of the profits. There's evidence, too, that these interest charges weren't presented to the illiterate, unwitting peasants in an upfront manner, but were hidden, folded into the principal payment, so that the landlord wouldn't be seen as violating the “no interest” rule of Jewish law. It's the first century functional equivalent of predatory payday loan practices, where borrowers often have little understanding of the disadvantageous terms and conditions, and pitfalls of the agreements that they're entering into.

But now, in the parable, the landowner is dissatisfied with the manager for some reason. Maybe the manager has gotten greedy, and is taking too big of a cut of the interest. Or maybe he's gotten lax or sloppy in how he conducts the landlord's affairs. Regardless of the reason, the manager is facing the reality that with the impending loss of his job, he's about to become as vulnerable as the debtors, of whom he's been taking advantage. He's going to become one of them – soon – and when that happens, he recognizes that he's going to need their help, even with something as basic as a place to stay.

And so to ingratiate himself with the debtors, he forgives them a large portion of their debts. Based on the horribly inflated rates they've been paying previously, the reduction of what they owe to the landowner – from 100 jugs of oil down to 50, or 100 containers of wheat down to 80 – these reductions likely represent a return to the pre-interest amount that they

originally borrowed, the original debt. The manager was, whether he intended it or not, now complying with Jewish law. He ended up doing the right thing, whether out of a sudden sense of righteousness, or fear for his future.

Jesus, though, doesn't seem bothered by – or even much interested in – the manager's motivation. If he did the right thing for the wrong reason, out of a sense of his own self-interest, well, does that really matter? Not to Jesus. Because, in this parable, as is true in so many of Jesus' parables, the thing that the parable seems to be about isn't really the thing.

This is not a story where Jesus says of the manager, thank God he was fired so that he got his comeuppance, a punishment for all the harm he'd inflicted.

Nor is it a story where Jesus says, thank God the manager is a rule follower now, compliant with Jewish law.

And it's not even a story where Jesus, defender of the marginalized, says, thank God he's not taking advantage of those poor peasants any longer.

The parable of the manager – while ostensibly about debt reduction or integrity or fair treatment of the marginalized poor – actually points to a larger truth, a graver condition: that a focus on wealth, or the seemingly endless desire for “more,” or the fear of not having enough whatever...that these are some of the ways we lose touch with the reality of our

interconnectedness: with the earth, with the world, with each other, and with God.

Wealth, in this parable, is the shoe: a useful thing for the manager, and one which provides him with a sense of security and protection, but which separates him from the needs and concerns of the debtors. It's something that sets him apart, that allows him to trudge on “who knows what all” without feeling much of anything.

In our modern societal landscape, there are so many “shoes” in addition to wealth that keep us separate from each other, promising security and protection from our sense of vulnerability. We're separated, often, by our perceptions of one another, mediated by the social media posts and Tweets and snippets of articles or videos we share or comment about online. We're separated by the assumptions we make about each other's religious and political affiliation, of what we look like or how we identify, of where we live, what job we have, whose hand we hold when we fall in love. We can walk through our lives — sometimes unwittingly, other times willfully — disconnected from the reality that we are all of the same earth and substance.

Earlier, I mentioned trips I took to Appalachia with work groups from the church where I used to be. I remember the first trip, and the first time we met the family whose house we'd be working on for the week. The patriarch of the family had applied to the ASP program, but hadn't told his family, and then he died. So, when we showed up, there was suspicion on the part of the family, leery of these church people who'd arrived out of

seeming nowhere, saying they were here to help. Was this a scam? Were we out to convert them, or take advantage?

Our group was uneasy, as well. Even though we were there as part of a legitimate program, we were anxious about stepping into the intimacy of someone's home, of doing work there, upsetting their routine. We were acutely aware of the inherent imbalanced dynamic between those serving and those being served. We were big city, they were remote rural. We came from different backgrounds, different experiences. So much seemed to separate us.

Yet, over the course of a week, we all — our church group and the family — we all took off our metaphorical shoes and tried hard to connect with one another, bit by bit sharing our lives. The teenagers in our group broke the ice with the family's little daughter, who was delighted to have the attention of older playmates. The mom and I talked about motherhood, sharing our worries about our kids' futures and what it was like to have aging, infirm parents. The dad and a man from my church, a contractor, talked about tools and fixing things, about hunting and fishing. Slowly, carefully, we stepped together onto common ground.

Returning to the enigmatic parable of the corrupt and dishonest landowner and manager, it is the separation between all the parties that is the problem, the barrier that is the problem. Because if we look closely at all of the laws and rules of scripture, at all the commandments and teachings of Jesus, it comes down to connection and relationship, about knowing and acting on the fact that we are all made of the same substance, made in the

same image of the same God who invites us to take off our shoes from time to time, to get in touch with the Holy Ground on which we all live, and move, and have our being. *Amen.*