

Sunday, September 22, 2019
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 20 (Year C)
Luke 16.1-13
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

What is Jesus thinking? He tells a parable about a dishonest manager who, when he is fired by his master, has the master's debtors falsify their bills, reducing the amounts they owe. Surprisingly, upon finding out what the manager did, the master is not particularly upset. In fact, he "commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly" (Lk 16.8a). And not only that, Jesus himself then says, "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes" (Lk 16.9). What? Did Jesus just commend the dishonest manager and lift him up as a model for his disciples to emulate? Well, yes. Yes he did. And I have just one thing to say. Who are you and what have you done with Jesus?

This is so unlike the Jesus we know. He actually praises the dishonest manager for engaging in practices that are clearly condemned elsewhere in Scripture. In fact, in our Old Testament reading for today, we heard the prophet Amos conveying God's condemnation of the ancient Israelites for similar dishonest business practices. The prophet declares that God will not tolerate such practices – "[making] the ephah small and the shekel great, and [practicing] deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat" – using dishonest means of measure such as reducing the size of the standard ephah (a measure of dry goods) or increasing the weight of a shekel (used to measure money), of having scales that are not calibrated properly, selling inferior products such as wheat that includes chaff, and other practices that swindle customers, particularly the poor. In short, charging more money for less goods. Isn't that something of what is going on in our Gospel? Not exactly the same thing, but certainly in the ballpark.

Now, to be sure, the parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel reading is certainly curious, is definitely uncharacteristic for Jesus. As a result, Biblical scholars generally agree that this is one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables to interpret. In his book, *Law in the New Testament*, J.D.M. Derrett, Emeritus Professor at the University of London, notes that this parable is the "problem child of parable exegesis," "the prince among difficult parables," and "a notorious puzzle" (*Synthesis*, Proper 20, 9/22/19).

Most scholars agree that this parable defies any satisfactory interpretation. And many preachers probably secretly think that this would have been a good Sunday to be on vacation—let the supply priest handle it. So what's really going on in this parable? And why is Jesus so willing to commend dishonest business practices?

In Jesus' time, it was the accepted practice that a manager would collect a commission on payments owed his master. When the manager in the parable was sacked, he knew he had to act quickly to secure his own future wellbeing. He devises a scheme to reduce the amounts the master's debtors owe as a way of winning favor with them; so that they will be inclined to help him out in his unemployment. One suggestion is that, in order to do this, the manager is

merely adjusting the debt which he had arranged in the first place. Perhaps reducing the amounts he had dishonestly jacked up so as to increase his own commission. That he was in effect writing off his commission. In which case, he was not really being dishonest toward his master, but taking a loss so that his master would still get what he was owed, but making it look like a super-good deal for the debtors. At any rate, the manager has now put the debtors under future obligation to him because of his perceived generosity and leniency toward them. The debtors will therefore be inclined to reciprocate his generosity at some future date when the manager is in need of help.

Despite whatever misconduct or mismanagement or incompetence led to the master firing the manager, the master commends him for acting shrewdly. The master still gets paid what he is due, thereby restoring the manager's credibility with his master. In addition, the reduced debts also make the master appear generous and lenient, which boosts the master's reputation. Definitely good for business. Or future business prospects. When all is said and done, everyone wins. The debtors, the master, and the manager himself all benefit from the manager's scheme.

Which brings us to why Jesus actually commends the manager's shrewdness. What it all boils down to is that the manager was faced with a dire situation, assessed his options, and acted in a clever manner to provide a favorable outcome for himself. And in his shrewdness, was able to do it in such a way that others—the debtors and the master—also benefit. That being the case, Jesus was not commending the dishonesty of the manager, but rather was commending his ability to adapt to his situation—to develop a plan of action that is prudent and ultimately proves to be beneficial to all. A win-win-win.

Jesus then follows up with some general comments on the implications of the parable. He first comments on “the children of this age” as compared to “the children of light.” On those who live in the secular world as compared to those who are followers of Christ. This is not a value judgement, but merely an observation. It is a recognition that the world operates differently than the Gospel. And as those who follow the Gospel, we need to engage in careful discernment as to how we participate in the world. How do we do what is good and right when confronted with ways of the world that are contrary to Gospel values?

Jesus then says “whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” (Lk 16.10). This is yet another call to be faithful to the values of the Gospel. Not just when with our fellow Christians, but in all areas of our lives. That we have a responsibility to use what has been entrusted to us by God not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the wider world. Because, after all, Christianity is not merely a religion. It is a way of life.

And then there is the ever popular statement, “No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Lk 16.13). In this statement, Jesus is not making a value judgement about money per se. Money is not evil in and of itself. Nor are those who have money evil. He is concerned more with the personal corruption that sometimes comes along with the pursuit of wealth. He is concerned with the obsession with wealth to the point that it becomes our sole focus, becoming an obstacle in our relationship with God, possibly even separating us from God. It's all about our attitude toward wealth and what we choose to do

with our wealth. Perhaps a better way to put it would be: one cannot serve God and wealth, but one can serve God with one's wealth.

The fundamental point of Jesus' parable and the comments that follow—all of which are, after all, addressed to his disciples—is how they are to engage in communal matters. In how they are to operate as church. As the Body of Christ. That as stewards of the church, as the stewards of God's Kingdom here on earth, they—we—are to have our eyes open, to see clearly what is coming, to be realistic about what that means for us and for the church, to carefully evaluate our options, and to take actions that address the reality of what is to come. All while recognizing that there is a future that we work toward: a world based on Gospel principles and the fulfillment of God's Kingdom.

In focusing on someone engaging in questionable business practices, Jesus is recognizing that we live in a world that often operates in ways that are not necessarily consistent with the ways of the Gospel. And while we may out of necessity operate within the ways of the secular world and even be good at handling secular business matters—managing the things of this world—we are not always as good at handling what God has entrusted into our care and responsibility as stewards of his Kingdom. Care for creation. Care for the poor and marginalized. Care for one another.

In order to survive, and even thrive, in such an environment—as the Body of Christ living in the midst of the secular world—we are called to use the things of the world in the service of God as astutely as the shrewdest schemers would use the resources at their disposal. The dishonest manager understood how to use what was entrusted to his care to serve a greater purpose—even if that purpose was actually self-serving. This must not be construed to mean that Jesus would be okay if we act unjustly toward others in our pursuit of living the Gospel. That would not ultimately be truly living the Gospel. The ends do not justify the means when it comes to Gospel living. Rather, Jesus desires that we should be as earnest and diligent in a good cause as the manager was in a questionable cause. And to bring all our resources—ourselves, our skills and talents, our time, and our financial resources—to bear in our pursuit of living the Gospel.

Admittedly, this does not completely explain Jesus' parable and how it applies to our own lives of faith. As one commentator noted, "In the final analysis, this parable defies any fully satisfactory explanation, and perhaps that is its point after all. For the questions and issues raised by the manager's actions and Jesus' response cause us not only to take another look at the story itself, but to look deep within ourselves as well. Was the manager dishonest or shrewd, and does it make a difference?" (*Synthesis*, Proper 20, 9/22/19).

What does make a difference is how we choose to answer for ourselves the questions and address the issues raised in the parable—as individuals and as a faith community. How do we seek to faithfully live as disciples of Jesus Christ, not just in this place, but also in the world "out there" which operates in ways different than the Gospel? The hallmarks of the Gospel, of Jesus' own ministry, are the commandments to love God and to love others. If we continue to focus on these goals in all areas of our lives with the same attention and enthusiasm we give our secular lives, the world would be a much better place.