

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

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*Luke 16:1-13*

*Then Jesus said to the disciples, 'There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." 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." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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.*

*'Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 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.'*

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Let's just get one thing out there: this is a just a plain *weird* parable. There's no getting around it. And I'm certainly not the first to come to this conclusion. Saint Augustine himself said of this parable, and I quote, "I can't believe this story came from the lips of our Lord."

Other parables are nice and tidy. The parable of the prodigal son leaves us with a clear hero of the story - the forgiving father. The parable of the Good Samaritan clearly teaches us that we should exercise radical hospitality even to those we would rather avoid. The parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep that we spoke about last week clearly demonstrate the incredible joy that God finds when what is lost is found.

But *this* parable has no tidy endings. This parable does not come to us tied up in a pretty bow, ready to be presented in an orderly and clear fashion.

As a preacher, this passage certainly is a daunting one on which to preach. I turned to Facebook this week to see what other preachers were doing with this bizarre parable. More than 35 people responded to my thread. Most of them gave comments about how they were avoiding this parable in today's lectionary readings at all costs. One friend of mine said she was starting a non-lectionary series a week earlier than planned specifically to avoid this passage. Another told me that he made a mistake reading the lectionary website and put the wrong passage down for today and - when he discovered his mistake and what the passage was

supposed to be - declined to fix it! Others told me that they were simply abandoning today's gospel reading and instead preaching on the 1 Timothy passage or one of the other two passages from the Old Testament.

On a more humorous and cruel note, I learned that one of my preaching friends was required to preach on this text as his first sermon in Preaching Class at seminary. In my opinion, that is a very particular form of cruel and unusual punishment.

Anyways, enough complaining and procrastinating on my part. Let's get right down to the text.

Our first character is a rich man. Rich people are not particularly looked upon favorably in Luke's gospel. Nevertheless, we don't know what he does. We simply know that he has enough money to hire someone else to manage it for him. This person, this manager, has allegedly been squandering the rich man's property. Now, again, we don't know exactly what "squandering" meant. But we do know that the verb "squander" is the same verb that is used to describe the actions of the prodigal son when he leaves town with his father's inheritance. Therefore, the manager in today's parable is being accused of treating his master's wealth and property very foolishly.

Therefore, the rich man summons his manager and confronts him about the alleged malfeasance. The manager does not try to deny it. He simply begins to ponder the seriousness of his situation and comes up with a plan. He claims he is not strong enough to dig (which means he's lazy). And he has way too much pride to be a street beggar. Therefore, he comes up with a plan to secure loyalty to him now that his employment is being terminated. He knows that he will be homeless and he needs to make some friends to take care of him after the fact.

And here the rich man makes a critical and foolish mistake. You do not fire the bookkeeper until you have the books *in your hands!*

So, the manager takes advantage of this gift, gathers up all the people who are indebted to his master. "How much do you owe my Master?" he asks one. "Cut it in half!" he replies. "How much do you owe my Master?" he asks another. "Take twenty off that amount!" he replies to this one. One by one, the manager goes down the line and reduces the amount of money or goods these people owe his master. And, in doing so, he makes a lot of friends at his master's expense.

But, yet again, the manager gets discovered. The rich man summons him and we all wait for the tongue-lashing to begin. We wait, expecting the rich man to have his manager thrown in jail. We, as the listeners of this parable, are thinking that this must be a parable about how bad things happen when we act dishonestly. We wait for the fun part where the dishonest manager is thrown into hell where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth!

But none of that happens. Instead, this already bizarre parable takes an even more bizarre twist and the rich man, the man who had been duped not once but twice by this manager, commends him for his shrewd behavior!

Wait...what? We are left thinking that Jesus has perhaps been out in the sun a little too long. The heat must be going to his head. The three previous parables made sense. You know, the ones about the lost coin, and the lost sheep, and the prodigal son. Those made sense. Those were, you know, really good, clear stories. But this....this just doesn't make sense. What ideal is there in this story to be imitated?

It has been said that there are two different kinds of parables, the “go and do likewise” parables and the “how much more then...” parables. For example, the Good Samaritan is a “go and do likewise” parable. The Samaritan was hospitable to a stranger in need and, therefore, you and I should “go and do likewise.” The parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow, on the other hand, is a “how much more then...” parable. Remember the story? There is a widow who is being treated unjustly and she keeps bugging an unjust judge who refuses to hear her case. Eventually, he gets so exasperated that he agrees to hear the woman’s case just to get her to shut up! The conclusion of the parable is that if even an unjust, cruel judge heard the woman’s case, “how much more then” will God, who loves us, listen to us in our need? Hence, “how much more then...” parable.

The case has been made that today’s parable is such a parable, a “how much more then...” parable. The case goes something like this. This dishonest manager is smart, shrewd, cunning, and has the ability to turn a crisis into an opportunity (even though it is at the expense of his rich master). Therefore, “how much more then” should we, as Christ’s disciples, be smart, shrewd, and perhaps even opportunistic regarding Christ’s call for us to be disciples of the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, here we have a dishonest man who dispersed money to people in need to save his own skin and it worked! He clearly devoted much imagination and risk-taking to fulfill his goal. Therefore, we too, as the church, should be clever in our dealings, understanding that one can be moral *and* shrewd at the same time. After all, it was Jesus himself who once said that we were to be as gentle as doves but as wise as serpents.

Now, it is entirely up to you whether or not you find this case to be believable. This week, I have scoured pretty much every commentary in my office for answers regarding this parable. And many commentators have found many ways to explain this parable and each, in my opinion, is just as unlikely as the next. This parable leaves us preachers doing what are called extreme “homiletical gymnastics” to contort ourselves and the story to try to make some kind of sense out of it.

Therefore, I will leave us today with a few remarks that I hope can shed at least some light on this passage.

First of all, it is humbling, isn’t it, to know that scripture is not always clear, concise, and straightforward. Scripture is a divine gift, a holy mystery, a message that we receive humbly each and every week in the context of worship. This passage of scripture is one that deserves to be looked at again and again and again.

Secondly, I can’t help but observe that even though the rich man’s money was dispersed in dishonest ways, the debtors to the rich man got more than a little grace. The man who owed 100 jugs of olive oil had his debt cut in half. The man who owed 100 containers of wheat got his debt reduced to 80. They didn’t ask for a reduction. It just happened. Perhaps this parable reminds us that sometimes grace comes to us in quite unexpected ways. Perhaps this parable has something to say to the privileged among us who choose to make money off of those who are vulnerable. What does this parable have to say to Big Pharma? To the for-profit healthcare industry? To the student loan industry? To the for-profit prison industry?

This is a puzzling parable, indeed. As I said, there is just no getting around it. In fact, if I was truly as shrewd and cunning as the manager in today’s passage, I would have had Jeff preach on it instead of me! There’s a part of me that wishes I could stand here before you with all the answers and we could pack this parable up in a nice little package until the next time it comes around in the revised common lectionary. But

that would make me just as dishonest as the manager in this parable. What a mystery it remains! Sometimes, we must simply embrace the mystery and keep exploring it. That, my friends, is what keeps us coming back for more, week after week!

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.