

Luke 16:1-13 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager

16 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. ² So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ ³ 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. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷ 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.’ ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ “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. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ 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.”

It's All Topsy Turvy

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Text: *Luke 16:1-13*

Jesus spoke to them in parables. He told them stories; the stories were analogies. The kingdom of God may seem small and unimpressive, but like the mustard seed, when it germinates and grows, it becomes a bush a hundred thousand times more impressive than the tiny seed it grew from. Or the sower broadcasts seeds. Some fall on the rocks, some on the path, some among the briars, and some on good and fertile ground. The analogy is pretty obvious. The word of God, the Gospel, is broadcast, just like the seeds. In some it finds rocky or hard-packed impenetrable ground. In some it sprouts, but the temptations of life drown it out or burn it up. But in some the Gospel finds fertile soil and flourishes and grows into great abundance.

These parables are great stories. They make quite simple messages come alive. Most of us, I think, are drawn in by stories much more than we are by statements of fact. If I tell you that a real neighbor is someone, no matter what side of the tracks they are from, who shows compassion, and if I remind you that very often the most upstanding citizens show the least care for others, you may nod your head in agreement. But if I tell you the story of the Good Samaritan, suddenly you are engaged at a deeper level. You have more sympathy for the man in the ditch. You react with disgust at the priest and Levite who walked to the other side of the road to avoid the injured man in the ditch. You are amazed at the time and generosity the Samaritan showed the injured man, even as he was the least likely person to be of help of the three who came along the road that day.

The parables of Jesus. They give us analogies to live by and to understand God by, and they bring them to life for us.

So here we go this morning. We have a manager. He runs the affairs of business for the owner of the company. All seems to be going well enough. But underneath, out of sight, it's not so wonderful. The manager is an embezzler. And someone blew the whistle on the embezzling manager.

The owner of the company calls in the manager. He says, in the words of Donald Trump, "You're fired."

The manager is in a fix. He thinks to himself, I'm a white-collar worker. I don't do manual labor. Besides, I cannot support the standard of living to which I am accustomed by actually working for a living. I'm going to have to do something fast.

The manager hits upon a plan. He still has a few days before he leaves his job. We don't know why that is, but he does. So the manager fires up the company's copy of QuickBooks. A few clicks of the mouse, a few keystrokes on the keyboard and he's got the listing of accounts receivable. He picks up the phone and begins to call. "Hi Mr. Jones, this is Oikonomos over at the plant. I see by our books that you owe us \$550. Well I'm going to help you out today. I'm sitting right here at the computer, and I'm going to change that debt to \$275, a 50% discount." Mr. Jones is of course dubious. But Oikonomos assures him that there are no strings attached.

Just doing it out of the goodness of his heart. And so it goes with calls to everyone on the accounts receivable list.

The manager was a more devious than he let on, though. He had embezzled some of the owner's profits, now he was giving more of the profits away to the company's customers. In fact, unless the mark-up was extraordinarily high, he was letting the customers pay less than cost for the company's products. He was devious with the customers, too, it turns out. He assured them there were no strings attached to the 50% discount. But in truth, Oikonomous was putting them in his debt. He was getting fired. He would soon be on the street. But he would have all these creditors who would be obligated to take him in.

Of course, the owner caught on pretty quick. But the manager figured, what the heck, I'm fired anyway. What more can he do? But here the story deviates. The owner comes to the manager and says, "Wow! You are really shrewd. That's fantastic. I shouldn't have fired you in the first place."

Okay, we've got a story. But what about the analogy? If we assume that the owner is God and that we are managers of what God has given us to care for, which I think is inescapable, we've got a big problem. The owner does his Donald Trump routine and brusquely fires the dishonest manager. The tone of the Greek text supports reading the owner's actions as Trump-like brusqueness, even violence. Then the manager makes a sneaky move to save himself. On the way out the door he ingratiates himself to the company's customers, so he'll have a place to go as he leaves. The manager looks out for himself, again dishonestly. But then the owner discovers the manager's second malfeasance. This time the manager – remember the owner is God – God, says, "Man, you're the man. You're worse than I thought. You're so bad I'm taking you back. I need people like you."

We're in a predicament, aren't we? This God doesn't make much sense. Praising the doubly dishonest manager doesn't make much sense. How are we supposed to understand the analogy that Jesus is presenting in this parable?

Well, that's the question, isn't it? And it's been the question that perplexes the best Biblical scholars right up to today. Many accept the analogy at face value. They think that Jesus is trying to put a little realism, a little pragmatism, into the Gospel. They think that Jesus means that if you act naively, you will get run over in this world. If you're not dishonest, you're just not going to make it. God takes care of those who take care of themselves, they might say.

I have to tell you something. If that's what Jesus is trying to say, if Jesus is saying, "Look, you've got to play the game," if Jesus is saying, "All this religious stuff is fine, but in the end you've got to be shrewd and dishonest," if that's what Jesus is saying, if that's what I ever come to believe that that is what Jesus is saying, that is the day that I will take off these robes, turn in my ordination and never preach again. In this world we live in, and throughout its history, it would be hard to find a mistake with graver consequences than when people have claimed that their most egregious wrongdoings are allowed by or encouraged by their religion. It seems to me painfully clear that almost every religion, including Christianity, goes to great lengths to undermine the evil we too easily rationalize, to undermine it, not promote it. It is inconceivable to me that Jesus himself would indulge in such rationalization.

I recognize, however, that I cannot simply stamp my feet and say I don't believe this parable. If I am to be more honest than the dishonest manager in the story, I need to suggest a different way of reading the parable. So, let's go.

First, we probably need to understand the context in which Jesus told the story a little bit better. The culture in Biblical times in the ancient near east was very different from our own. Here in the United States we live in a democracy in which we claim to all be created equal. It may be imperfect, but there is an overriding belief, that most of us are fortunate to live with, that we have inalienable rights to freedom and the pursuit of happiness, to fairness in business and in our interactions with one another. The ancient near east was much different. There were a very few rich people, and they had all the rights. The others were poor. They were under the thumb of the rich. They had no guaranteed rights. The ancient prophets and the religion of Israel was a voice for the widow and the orphan, the poor and the stranger, but they were a voice against the tide of the society. It's one of the reasons that Jesus got into so much trouble. It was the poor and the powerless who flocked to him in the desert. He was hanging out with the people on the wrong side of the tracks. Not only that, he was talking to them as though they were people. This was troubling to the rich and powerful, who wanted these people to remain fearful and uncultured subjects.

So, now imagine Jesus in the desert with his disciples and other followers, almost all of whom were from this low and oppressed class. When he begins the story of the dishonest manager, the people he was talking to immediately identified with the manager, not with the owner. While we are affronted by the manager's dishonesty, Jesus' hearers were cheering for him. Their hearts sagged when he got caught. But they cheered when the manager came up with his ingenious plan to save himself. And they would have agreed with the idea that if people in their situation in life were to succeed, they would need to be as shrewd as that manager was. But they also were aware of the huge risks. For in the world in which they lived, they could expect no mercy from the rich and powerful. At the drop of a hat they could expect the severest punishment.

So here comes Jesus, an enigma unlike any they had ever seen before. In the world they live in, and in this sense their world isn't so different from ours, in the world they live in, you've got to line yourself up with one side or another. Jesus, it seems abundantly clear, sides with the poor and the dispossessed. He socializes with them. He considers them human beings. They are the ones who flock to him. You don't see Jesus in the halls of power until he is arrested, and then he's there as a criminal. There seems to be no question on which side Jesus falls.

But all of a sudden those who are following him, those who see him as an ally, those who hear him speak, all of a sudden they are caught off-guard. Often his stories don't add up. For example, in this story of the dishonest manager, Jesus' hearers would have expected one of two endings. The owner might have punished the manager even more severely for his second offense, and in that case Jesus' hearers would have shaken their heads and said to themselves, "Well, that's how it always ends up. We're under the thumbs of the rich, and they always get us." The other way they might have thought the story would end was that the manager got away with his second offense, and in that case they would have cheered the rare time when their side actually won.

Jesus gives them neither ending. Jesus is unwilling to see the world the way his hearers do or the way they want him too. He's unwilling to completely choose sides and then allow the side he's chosen to do anything it wants. Most of all, Jesus is unwilling to let the societal divisions of the ancient near east, or of anywhere else, be the playing field on which God operates. Paul Neuchterlein remarks that Jesus tells a story that refuses to go by the script. In

doing so Jesus intends to turn things topsy turvy. He wants to shatter the old alliances and challenge the bankrupt, knee-jerk self-justifications and self-deceptions. According to the script you get a story about a rich man acting harshly and a peasant deliciously trying to deceive his owner. As Neuchterlein says it, “The story's last move leaves the hearer with the fact that their hero, the servant, has acted unjustly, and their bad guy has shown mercy.”¹ Bernard Brandon Scott says it even more provocatively in his book, *Hear Then the Parable*. Scotts says, “The hearer now has no way to navigate in the world; its solid moorings have been lost. Are masters cruel or not? Are victims right in striking back?”²

Jesus is looking to break the old molds. In the old mold the powerful are unjust and the weak are just. In the old mold, the powerful always have power, but never have justice. In the old mold, the poor never have power, and almost no matter what they do, they are said to be fighting for justice. The old mold is a mold where getting even is the name of the game. The powerful get even by, well, exercising their power, by punishment. The weak get even by deviousness.

Jesus wants us to imagine a world which is like unto the kingdom of God, world in which the old mold is shattered. Scott says that the parable breaks the old equations related to power and justice and getting even. “The kingdom is for the vulnerable, for masters and stewards who do not get even, he says.”³

Jesus pulls the rug out entirely out from under all who hear him. The vulnerable are accountable, despite their lack of power. The manager’s actions are not vindicated in the parable. On the other hand, the powerful are to act with mercy, even toward those who, like the manager, have acted wrongly. Jesus gives us ending that challenges the old calculus. He joins accountability and mercy where we fail. He shatters the old ideas of punishment and retribution and getting even.

So, I will keep my robe and ordination and go on to preach another day, for in this parable I see a Jesus who neither allows us to rationalize away our wrong, but who also shows a God who meets us with mercy and forgiveness rather than merciless punishment, in the face of our malfesances. Jesus has turned things topsy turvy, and for that I can only say, thanks be to God. Amen.

¹http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/proper20c.htm

²Quoted in: http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/proper20c.htm

³Ibid