

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
15th Sunday after Pentecost
September 22, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Proverbs 19:3-6, 8

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

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.”

Shrewd Skills

I have often heard the phrase: “Everyone loves a bargain.” Well, there is bound to be an exception, but I would hardly know. You see, I know that I am not a shopper. I rarely look for sales, and I take no pleasure in walking the aisles of department stores. My wardrobe is primarily from LL Bean, which is a direct result of my attitude toward shopping. As a result you could describe my “look” as threadbare, perhaps, but it suits me just fine.

Unlike me, if you are a shopper, someone who really likes a deal, you might be fascinated with the **wayward manager** in our scripture lesson today. He seems pretty crafty at striking a deal, so you might want him to go along with you shopping at a flea market to help you haggle with the sellers' prices. At first reading, you might think the manager who is being dismissed would be at the center of a reality show in 1st century Palestine, had there been such entertainment.

In this parable of the **Dishonest Manager**, Jesus gives us a look into some savvy business dealings that carry us on a ride of personal gain and pride, romping through a set of **management decisions** which leverage the manager's position to his own advantage. Even more remarkable is that despite falling out with his master over ill-gotten gains, the fellow who fired him pays him a **compliment**. Certainly, this is complicated business relationship that requires some unraveling. For most of us, the final result is so confusing that, by the end, we're not sure who we're supposed to be rooting for: the dishonest manager, the tenants, or the disgruntled owner, who seems to be taking a loss in all of this, but winds up boasting on the manager's shrewdness. Amazingly, all of this is coming about just as the manager is given the pink slip!

For me, these are the kinds of insights that make **reading the scriptures** such a joy and pleasure, while doling out a portion of sheer frustration on the side. It is a puzzlement to the casual skimmer of parables and a potential nightmare for the student learning the art of preaching. And yet, there is **wisdom** for us to gain here: insights from which to "profit" in this entertaining story with a surprising conclusion.

Although this particular parable is not present in *Matthew*, *Mark*, or *John*, this kind of story with its unusual spin is not unique to the gospel stories. In fact, it is in keeping with any number of great "**tricksters**" in the Bible: Joseph turning the tables on Potiphar, Jacob tricking his father in transferring his birthright, and many others. Listen to this story from the rabbis who wrote commentary during the time that followed Jesus.

A man was caught stealing and the king ordered that he be hanged for his crime. On the way to the gallows, the condemned man said to the governor that he knew a wonderful secret, and it would be a pity to allow it to die with him. But, he would only disclose it to the king. He told his keeper that he would put a seed of a pomegranate in the ground, and through the secret taught to him by his father he would make it grow and bear fruit overnight.

Soon, the thief was brought before the king with all the high officers of the court. In a grassy area, the thief dug a hole and said, "This seed must only be put in the ground by a man who has never stolen or taken anything which did not belong to him. I, being a thief, cannot do it." So he turned to the local governor. But, he refused, saying that in his younger days he had held onto something which did not belong to him. Then, the treasurer refused, saying that in dealing with such large sums each day, he might have entered too much or too little, creating an error. Even the king confessed that he had kept a necklace of his father's which was not his.

After all of this, the convicted thief said, “You are all mighty and powerful and want nothing, and yet you cannot plant the seed, while I sentenced to die by hanging. I stole only a little, because I was starving.” Realizing the truth in this trail by confession, the king immediately pardoned the thief. (Gaster, *The Exempla of the Rabbis*)

You can see that this is an interesting story with a twist. It places a man whose morals are suspect into a position to allow others, who have judged him guilty, to **judge themselves**. Of course, this is the way that **God works** in and through us through the **life and ministry of Jesus**. As believers, you and I can easily see the **divine** in Jesus. And, in the scriptures, we can compare ourselves and our actions to the example of those people who opposed Jesus. Repeatedly, these people, attempting to uphold the strict interpretation of the law, pompously point out the faults that they perceive in Jesus. Then, Jesus **turns the tables**, and they find themselves wanting: seeing for themselves that they have fallen short of an ideal or virtue which they themselves had constructed in order to trap Jesus. The lesson for us comes in reading about these events through the parable. Gradually, the parable helps us to understand that we could be just as guilty as the scribes, the priests, and the Pharisees.

This is entirely in keeping with other parables from Jesus. If you recall the **Parable of the Good Samaritan**, only the unholy, outcast Samaritan showed **mercy and personal sacrifice** for the injured person on the roadside: not the the priest or the Levite, who were bound to uphold the Law and chose to remain ritually clean to stay on their path of personal righteousness in their duties at the temple in Jerusalem.

So, in our scripture lesson, we do not expect the **wayward steward** to be on a path of righteousness. And, that is not part of this particular parable. But, one explanation of our story is that the steward, the manager, continues in his clever pursuits and uses his understanding of “the system” to carve out a niche for himself as a **generous individual**. He discounts the amount owed on the invoices, **removing his commission** and the expenses of sales and marketing the oil and grain. This allows the tenants to keep the **same amount** of produce as they would have had originally, simultaneously providing the owner of the land with **identical amount** that he was due for these contracted, or tenant, farmers.

Seeing this shrewd maneuvering, even the land owner admired the **cleverness** of this wayward manager. Unexpectedly, the owner’s view of the wayward steward has now shifted. The steward is acting selflessly, as he has **denied income** for himself in order to **gain acceptance** and favor among the tenants that he formerly managed.

That seems a bit fantastic, but could this happen today? Well, a few years back the New England Patriots quarterback, Tom Brady, became the center of a controversy known as “**Deflate-gate**.” Tom Brady was accused of having the footballs deflated from their standard pressure, making them easier to throw and catch. But, these were the footballs that only the Patriots used while on offense. Some thought this was an unfair advantage for the game. If the owners of the Patriots had fired Tom Brady, he could have done something similar to the manager in the parable: Tom Brady could provide **a gift** to each of his lineman, receivers and running backs on his former team on the way out the door. Once these big fellas received their **new BMW 5-series sedan**, very likely they would hold him in higher regard than spectators and sportswriters. And, Tom Brady would receive favorable **publicity** and the **goodwill** of his, now former, teammates, even though it cost him some money out of pocket.

And, perhaps that resulting feeling of goodwill is the **intended undercurrent** throughout the conclusion of this very interesting **scripture lesson**. Because, Jesus is pointing out that, no matter how underhanded or skeptical the transactions might seem, you and I are can **benefit** personally from this knowledge, even if it seems out of place. But, he quickly points out that we need to keep **perspective** on the things that are **important**. Because, in the big picture our position in the community or among our family and friends or even our status in our congregation are not the sum of **who we are** or the most important part of our ongoing existence. In fact they are nothing compared to the ultimate goal of working in, and for, **God's kingdom**.

The remarkable aspect of this parable is that Jesus used the business practices of the day to show us just how **fruitless** our efforts can be when we spin our wheels keeping up with our neighbor or outdoing one another in business.

“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?”

Luke 16:11-12 NRSV

Now, if you read this through quickly, each verse after the story seems only marginally related to the one the preceded or followed it. They seem to be **linked** by the topic at hand or even single words. Perhaps, as scholars suspect, they were wise sayings attributed to Jesus that stood on their own, originally; or, they might have been used for particular situations. But, in the course of forming this gospel, they are grouped together here for a particular purpose.

Even though the catch words trip over one another, they tie these phrases together as a **narrative**, a story meant of you and me. Because, now we have moved from **moral judgement** to discussions about living in the **kingdom of God**, which has been foretold by the prophets and John the Baptist and now **declared by Jesus Christ**.

Of course, we can see that **wealth and God** are related. The wealth that we seek is a **creation** of God. But, God is **sovereign**: Ruler over all. We do not have to look very far in our own time to realize that wealth and its pursuit can, and do, **consume us**. Soon, we can find ourselves bowing in submission to the **demands** of obtaining and preserving that wealth, as if the wealth itself were an **object of worship**, instead of Almighty God.

And, that is the place where we all are going to **fall short**. As we say in our confession, **we have sinned** against God and one another. But, in the presence of God and guided by God's Spirit, we are presented with a **lens** that helps us see **more clearly** that honesty and loyalty are greater treasures than goods and wealth. When we live **in Christ**, we are better able to understand that these material things do not matter in the scope of **God's claim** on our lives. And, our **choices**, the ones we make every day, will indicate the seriousness of **our commitment to God** in answering the demands of Christ in our living.

In looking at the stories and parables of Jesus, we can see that he was a **shrewd observer** of the human condition. He is able to point out nearly every aspect of our living. He even makes a running commentary on the **business dealings** of the time, as he did in our scripture lesson today. When you and I say that we are **followers of Jesus**, that we are committed as **disciples** to the teachings and the example of Christ, we are saying that we expect to be **faithful** before God in **every aspect** of our lives. And, that is lived out, not in fear of punishment for wrongdoing, but in **love of God** and in genuine love of our fellow human beings in every walk of life and of every race, creed, and color.

And, how will that take place? As the great preacher **Fred Craddock** put it, it is unlikely that most of us will ever christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet of ministers, dine with a queen, convert a nation, or become a martyr by being burned at the stake. More likely the week coming up will present no more than a chance to **give a cup of water** to someone, write a note, visit a friend or loved one in need of care at a nursing home, vote for a county commissioner, teach a Sunday school class, **share a meal**, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat (Craddock, *Luke*; edited with insertions and **bold**). As Jesus stated is so simply:

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much”

Luke 16:10 (NRSV)

It is in the everyday, the routine, that we will serve and **live out** the gospel message. And, it is God who provides that opportunity to us, giving us a **new life** in Jesus Christ.

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