

Sept 18, 2022

Last week at the picnic, I spoke about the parable of lost sheep, about how it is of a piece with parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost or prodigal son. These parables are clearly meant to be clearly understood, I said. Jesus is telling us what is truly precious: finding the lost, saving the sinner, and (as we are meant to know) **we** are the lost, **we** are the broken, **we** are the separated, **we** are the sinners. This isn't meant to be a shaming (as the word sin regrettably has often been used)but a gathering in, A way of naming us and claiming us as God's *beloved*.

And... then this week I got this parable, called alternately the dishonest manager or the shrewd steward! Take your pick! And now my words about parables that are meant to be clearly understood flies right out the stained glass window!

C'Mon! It is no exaggeration to say that this parable is notorious for having stumped even the best and most creative interpreters. THX lectionary!

I'd like to retell and focus on just the parable portion of this reading. Luke's interpretation at the end is clear enough and I like it very much: *You can't serve God and serve money*. But you know this already. I will focus just on the parable, which seems more

complicated and less familiar. Why did Jesus tell such a weird, incongruous story?

A property owner comes home. He has heard a rumor? (first question: is the rumor true or untrue?) He has heard a rumor that his property is being squandered. (2nd question: How is it being squandered? Is the manager ignoring his responsibilities and out partying with the prodigal son? Is he skimming his own cut off the top of the rents? Or is it remotely possible that he is forgiving people who can't pay their rents...? We don't know. We can only assume that these facts aren't important for the storyteller. But I am reminded at this point that bad things happen to good and bad people all the time and that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. Expletive deleted-s happens.)

In any case the property owner fires his property manager for dishonesty. The Manager...suddenly unemployed...anxious about how he will make ends meet... knowing he can't do hard physical labor and not wanting to beg (which I find admirable) says....

“I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.”

(Is this some kind of a Dale Carnegie scheme? How to win friends and influence people? The art of the deal? Or goodneighborliness? Or all of the above?) The manager then gathers together all the people that owe the property owner money. *How much do you owe my master ?* he asks them. *A hundred jugs*

of olive oil, one says. Then, take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Then he asked another, *And how much do you owe?* The man replied, *A hundred containers of wheat.* He said to him, *Take your bill and make it eighty.* And he continued in this way collecting partial payment on all his master's debts and forgiving the rest and the debtors go home, presumably relieved and happy to welcome him into their homes in the future if he should need a place to lay his head. He then brings this partial payment to the property owner who has already fired him and to our consternation, the owner commends him for being shrewd. Shrewd? Is this a new Biblical value? But wait, does the property owner give him his job back? We don't know.

No one seems particularly exemplary here.

Here the narrator of the parable, Jesus (as remembered by Luke) interjects *I tell you to make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

Who are *they*? And if it is these poor manipulated farmers, the debtors, how specifically do they have access to eternal homes?

So many gaps! So many questions?! Different Biblical scholars have creatively filled in the gaps in the story with interesting interpretations. In several the manager is recast as a misunderstood good guy. We like models of goodness! In one version the manager is a revolutionary protesting a corrupt system by being a

Robin Hood. (Interesting!) In another, the commentator points out that it is against the laws of Deuteronomy to collect interest. Could the amount the manager forgave actually be the disallowed interest? This would make him a righteous religious man! I loved this information and we crave an example of goodness we can emulate but I think attempts to rehabilitate the manager miss the point. The manager is a sinner *as we all are* and our financial gains are always in some fashion ill-gotten if you trace them back far enough. *But Jesus isn't interested in who is pure.*

The manager is a compromised real world guy, like all us. The narrator of the parable then underlines this point. *For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.* Apparently for the narrator/Jesus, real world compromises can be more faithful than unwise attempts at religious purity.

So what might this parable suggest for us real world folks? Put your stock in people, not portfolios maybe?

A professor at Yale once said: *A parable is like a car, made to take you somewhere. If you want to understand what it's for, don't get caught up in the details of how it is made. Look at where it is going.* But first I want to look very briefly at where it's been.

Remember the parable of the good samaritan? Elaine preached a wonderful sermon on this this summer. She pointed out that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a question. An expert in the law asks Jesus...I get that I am supposed to love God and my neighbor. But then who qualifies as my neighbor?

The parable then turns this question on its head. At the end of the parable we are meant to imagine ourselves in the position of the one who is lying in the middle of the road. The question shouldn't be who qualifies as my neighbor. But who, lying in the middle to the road, will say I have been a neighbor to them?

So now...What if these debtors, these poor farmers are the ones lying in the road? They are the ones that have the least power. These are the ones that Jesus and his interpreter Luke care about the most, the ones Jesus is disguised in: *For whenever you did it for the least of these you did it for me.* What if *these* least-of-these are the ones who eventually have the last word on whether or not we will enter our eternal homes?

Here are two short true stories.

The first is about neighborliness and the 2nd about financial compromise. The first is the story I've told before about a prominent local real estate agent from Middletown who fell on Main Street last year and lay there bleeding. When he looked up from the ground what he saw first was our sexton James Earl

Thomas, taking his t-shirt off in the freezing cold to wrap it around the wound. From his position bleeding on the ground, who would this business man have said had been a neighbor to him?

And secondly...about financial compromises:

2 years ago, in vestry we debated whether it was ok for our church to apply for a PPP loan from the government during covid.

Ultimately, we decided yes but there was robust discussion. Would refraining from taking the loan insure it went to needier folk? Was staying solvent in an uncertain future a good that might spread to the disadvantaged in our community? I remembered then what Mary Ellen Shuckerow from St Vincent de Paul had said to me when I first came to town: *The best thing you can do for the street community that we both care about, Mary is keep your lights on.*

In fact she said, if you can, LIGHT UP the church at night. (Thank you Hector for all the work you have done on this!) And bring that lawn alive! Let people know that the building and you and God are here and alive.

We have tried to do that. And if the tag sale on the lawn yesterday is an example we have done that well. We are called to wrestle in gritty situations that don't come with perfect answers. So, what are we called to do in compromised situations with our compromised wealth? Where do we end up in this car ride of a parable? The very next line which follows our reading for today is instructive.

14 The Pharisees, who loved money, heard this parable and were sneering at Jesus. **15** He said to them, “You are the ones who

justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts.

In life I think, sometimes we are the property owners, the real estate agents, the people with the power ; even when we don't see it or want to admit it, whether that power is financial or social or familial or racial or emotional.

Sometimes we are the manager, caught in the middle, afraid for our future and our families.

And at some time we *will be* the least of these, the needy ones, with no place to turn.

In each situation, how can we live faithfully with our resources or lack of them, in accordance with our values about what is eternal? And who will experience us as a neighbor? The dishonest savvy manager made a plan he could live with eternally. May we do the same.

Amen