

Shrewd Service

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18 September 2016

Amos 8:4-7, Luke 16:1-13

Luke's gospel takes most of the parables and miracle stories and places them together as an extended sequence. So, this story joins the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Most of these parables we have a handle on—we can find our place in them, can tease out the outlines of the godly economy that Jesus proclaims that he calls the kingdom of God.

This parable—well—let me share the response of a favorite commentator. Jill Duffield, of The Presbyterian Outlook, complains about Luke's puzzling money talk asking, "could you not confuse matters with this odd parable that seems to commend cheating? What the what is going on here?"¹

The parable begins pretty simply: a "certain" rich man has a manager—our main characters are lined up, and nothing seems TOO odd.

Our manager—the οἰκονόμος—was the steward of his master's property. He was probably a freed slave and he held a position of great trust. It would have been his responsibility to take care of the household accounts, to see that the servants were paid fairly and to ensure the minor children received adequate support. Think of him as the chief financial officer for a wealthy, extended family.

Word comes to the rich man that his steward was "squandering" his property.

We've only made it to the second half of the first sentence, and we've hit conflicted interpretational waters.

The Greek word for squander means to scatter, or to waste, to disperse into the wind. It's what the prodigal son did with his inheritance in the foreign land. Lots of ink has been spilled (LOTS OF INK) over the manager's "criminal intent" or lack of it. Was he lining his own pockets with his master's money? Was he just a poor manager who had trouble keeping the books? Was he too generous with the household? Did he throw good money after bad investments?

For some he is as conniving as Frank Underwood and for others as hapless as Barney Fife.

We will never know.

All we know is that the boss hears rumors about problems and the manager gets a pink slip. Only one more thing is required—the rich man wants to see the books.

I'm kind of amazed at this nameless manager's honest self-assessment—just what a Career Coach would counsel during a job transition. With brutal clarity, he announces, "I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg." We must take his word that those are his realistic choices for future employment.

I don't know when this parable got its name, but in it the manager is often called dishonest or unjust. But it seems to be a stroke of calculated genius—of shrewdness—when he “cooks” the books to create his own golden parachute.

He reduces the debts owed to the estate, 20 percent, 50 percent. He does it in person, one by one, inviting the debtors to rewrite their own bills. Talk about customer service! He invests his last days as a manager cultivating relationships with those who can give him a future.

The kicker is this—the master discovers this scheme and doesn't prosecute the manager, he praises him instead. And it seems Jesus does too, telling his disciples: “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

What the what? Indeed!

By its very oddness, this parable seems to have meaning deeper than its simple premise, but that meaning has been elusive for even the most theologically and historically educated commentators. It's almost universally the first statement in most of their commentary. So today, we are left to wrestle with the questions.

Stanley Hauerwas talks about how preachers “find ways to make this parable die of a thousand qualifications...” He points that Christians spend our time interpreting the commendation of the dishonest steward “and forget that Jesus is making a claim about our money.”²

Now I'm “going to meddling.”

I grew up bi-theological, a child of a progressive Presbyterian Church and a student at a conservative Southern Baptist School. At school, I actually heard a sermon once about “Money: the root of all evils.” But in my home congregation, I learned more of the passage which begins “For the love of money is the root of all evils...” (1 Tim 6:10)

I learned that faithfulness and money meant keeping money in its proper perspective. I was, in the words of Jesus, to serve God and not wealth, to trust in God and not money, it was all about maintaining the right attitude. Hauerwas notes that this parable doesn't fit that easy interpretation and he writes, “Jesus does not suggest that the problem is the attitude we take toward God and/or wealth. Rather He tells us quite frankly if we have money we are in trouble when it comes to getting into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Why might that be?

When I was growing up, I made my spending money by mowing lawns and cleaning houses. It was strictly a friends and family affair, so it didn't register with me as “real” job. But I will never forget the first paycheck I got from Casual Corner, made all the more “real” with that income tax withholding and the size of that corporate check. It was a moment of great pride for me. Honest pay for honest work. I felt that it was money I deserved. After all, I had spent the heat wave of July 1980, in Houston, selling wool suits and rabbit fur coats to mall patrons 36 hours a week!

It was honest money, right?

Yet, Hauerwas points out that I—that we—“had the good luck to be born into good homes that had the habits that would make us a success in the kind of economic world in which we find ourselves. But the luck of our birth is based, of course, on the fact that our wealth is the result of dishonest appropriation...” A statement he tempers by saying, “Most capitalists are not themselves unjust but rather they simply inherit the practices of injustices.”³

Our nightly news and morning papers show us that we are still dealing with the legacy of racism—our nations “original” sin. Native Americans were dispossessed of this land, by deceit and by force and Africans were enslaved to ensure our nation’s economic gain. We are heirs to the legacy of our founders and we cannot choose to live outside of that brokenness. We are caught up in the unjust systems of this country and this world.

With less than 5% of the world’s population, the United States uses almost 25% of the world’s fossil fuel resources. As a nation, we throw away 200,000 tons of edible food each day. In our lifetimes, most Americans will generate 52 tons of garbage. Meanwhile more than 2.8 million people around the globe live on less than \$2 a day.

It is heartbreaking to confess that “we are a people who flourish because other do not.”⁴

So we might take to heart that we share a common bond with the shrewd manager—the dollars in our pockets and portfolios have all the earmarks of dishonest wealth.

So how do we as people of faith hear this word? If there is no hope, why are we here? Where do we find the good news?

Frederick Buechner once wrote, “The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.” It is, he says, the reminder that we are sinners, “eight parts chicken, phony, slob... But it is also the news that [we are] loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for... the news of the Gospel is that extraordinary things happen.”⁵

Jesus tells his disciples—and us—that we *can be* faithful with wealth that is not justly ours. Jesus commands us to use our money, our dishonest wealth, to seek friendship with those who ARE near to the kingdom of God. In Jesus’ own words, they are the poor and the hungry, those who mourn and those who are persecuted and those who are our enemies.

We are to seek friendship, which is very different from the actions of the shrewd steward. Charles Cousar writes, “Instead of employing your money to create a group that owes you favors, make friends with your money. Friendship involves commonality and equality, not indebtedness.”⁶

We make friends by relieving the inequities and building common ground and in doing so we come to glimpse the inner workings of God’s kingdom. It is not our generosity that saves us, but the generosity of the God which we are called to imitate.

Our God is the one who seeks the sheep when we are lost, sending the Son to find us and claim our hearts and bring us back into God’s fold. This is the father who does not condemn his prodigal son but when the son returns, rushes out to restore him to the family. This is the master who praises his manager’s initiative rather than prosecuting his manager’s dishonesty. This is the God of forgiveness and reconciliation, of justice and of peace.

Hauerwas writes, “God is a generous God who offers us forgiveness of our sins—sins that are all the more powerful because we cannot will our way out of them. We are caught, but God has freed us from our ‘caughtness’ through Jesus Christ...”⁷

We are freed, we are forgiven and the “true riches” that come to us are the gifts of God’s generosity and God’s grace—forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with one another.

This week, I had a “WordGirl” moment. Differences in Bible translations led me to the Greek lexicon. The manager of our story was an οἰκονόμος, which is the word for steward. But Thayer’s Lexicon goes further.

Today we have dedicated our Sunday School teachers and Youth advisors—and according to Thayer’s, Christian teachers, like the apostles are “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). Let us thank them and hold them in prayer as they share the rich treasure of the God’s grace with our children and youth.

Further still, Thayer’s notes that we—all of us—are “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10) when we seek to share what has been entrusted to us to promote the common good.

So we use our money to help the poor and feed the hungry. We use our compassion to comfort those who mourn. We lift our voices to protest persecution and oppression. We seek to wage peace with our enemies.

We do this even as we come to terms with our own complicity in the brokenness and injustice that surround us. We do this even as we pray for God’s kingdom to come. We do this as stewards of the gospel – through which and in which extraordinary things unfold.

Amen.

¹ Jill Duffield. “Looking into the Lectionary-September 18, 2016.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*. 16 September 2016. Web.

² Stanley Hauerwas. “Living on Dishonest Wealth.” *Journal for Preachers: Advent 1996*. 15.

³ Hauerwas. 16.

⁴ Hauerwas. 17

⁵ Frederick Buechner. *Telling the Truth: the gospel as tragedy, comedy and fairy tale*. New York: Harper Collins, 1977. 7.

⁶ Charles Cousar. “Proper 20, Luke 16:1-13.” *Texts for Preaching: Year C*. Louisville: WJK, 1994. 526.

⁷ Hauerwas. 17.