

Sermon for Sunday, September 18th, 2022

Luke 16:1-13

¹Then 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. ²So 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.’ ³Then 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. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then 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.’ ⁸And 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. ⁹And 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. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No 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.”

You're busted! Perhaps you've heard those words in some context or another. Maybe you caught your kids doing something they shouldn't have been doing. Perhaps a teacher at school caught you or someone you know cheating on an exam. Or doing something unkind, unethical, or perhaps even illegal.

As a kid, when we heard those words, “You’re busted”, it might have meant a slap on the wrist by a teacher or a wrap on the knuckles with a ruler, or maybe just embarrassment and having been caught. As an adult, however, the consequences may have been more substantial. Perhaps someone got busted in a drug deal, or got caught embezzling money, or stealing something from a store. And the consequences often are much more severe. It could mean jail time, expulsion from your community, or even a ruling of your own reputation, and more.

In our gospel lesson today we find ourselves looking in on a couple of questionable business transactions on the part of a dishonest or shrewd manager (some commentaries on this parable use one or the other descriptions, but are they really the same?). He manages his boss’s property. Perhaps he's a shyster, or a con man trying to save his own hide by wheeling and dealing with his boss’s money, knowing that he's about to be fired. He's worried about what's next for him when he no longer has a job.

And so what does he do? He reduces the debts others owe his boss so that maybe they'll help him out when he's looking for work. And you can just hear him wheeling and dealing with the two people in our story today. You can just picture him a cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth perhaps, pulling out his pencil as he calculates how much he can swindle out of the debtors in front of them, taking what's owed his boss for himself. And lo and behold, when the boss finds out what his manager has done - giving away much of the proceeds owed him, he doesn't throw the book at him. Instead the boss commends his manager's creativity.

Go figure. I mean, if you were the boss here and you had caught your manager red-handed giving away your own money, what would you have done? And what's more, Jesus actually says, "Make friends of yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it's gone, you will have an eternal home."

This message of almost acceptance, and even praise by Jesus is nowhere near what we expect him to say in the situation. We expect to hear words of condemnation from Jesus. Harsh words of judgment perhaps. But instead, only words of, if not encouragement, then certainly acceptance of what this dishonest manager has done with the boss's money.

Now, let's slowly pull out from this one scene, moving out to the 30,000 foot level, to survey the wider landscape of the world. And we see people all around the world everywhere every day, doing a little deals just like this one in our gospel text today. Shady people perhaps, desperate people perhaps, regular honest folks, people doing things to save their own hides, to feather their own coffers, to gain an advantage over someone else perhaps. Making decisions, doing deals with others, that benefit them in the moment, but are clearly shady at best.

People, cheating on their taxes. People in high places of government taking bribes in order to get contracts for their friends or business associates. People... institutions charging exorbitant interest rates to people who can least afford it, in order to boost their own bottom line, or to boost a stock price. Parents of applicants, fudging information on college entrance exams in order to get their kids into the most prestigious institutions. Builders cutting corners to save more money. Using less than adequate materials. We see these and more every day in the headlines. And on and on it goes. All over the place, as we survey the wider landscape. This is the way the world, in God's house, works.

It's the household of God's creation, and looking at it all from 30,000 feet, it can get ugly, messy, shady, and maddening. Because it's being run by us, broken, sinful, greedy people, at the ground level. People just like you and me doing shady things, hurtful things, deceitful things to others so that we can gain an advantage for ourselves, however that looks for us.

Now, doing shady, or dishonest, or questionable deals like our manager in the story today may make us feel good in the short term. But in doing so, we are really squandering what God has entrusted with us. And that is to care for all of creation, and to love both God and neighbor. To tend to the sick and needy, to the lame, to the outcast, to feed the hungry and to help the poor. We squander God's good creation trying to bend it all to our own private advantage.

So here's the message of the gospel today as I see it, as challenging as this parable sounds on the surface. Jesus invites us to turn our unsavory thoughts, deeds, and actions, into acts of grace and love and generosity. To expend our energies not on deceit, or trickery, but on acts of kindness toward others. To imagine what's possible if we spent our energies not on things that don't last but on things that last. Things like living lives of generosity; living lives of faith; living life lives worthy of the kingdom of God.

I think this challenging parable of the dishonest or shrewd manager, reminds us that God, in Christ, is faithful in his love for all of us despite our squandering the gifts that God has given us. Despite the twist and turns of the story, this parable is a love story. A love story of a God who loves us even though we are often busted for doing unsavory things like the manager in our gospel today. It's a story of God's persistent and fierce love for us consistently imperfect human beings.

Yes, we do things that are displeasing to God. Yes we often put ourselves above others in order to gain advantage for ourselves. Yes, we will be dishonest in much at times. But all are invited and welcomed and will be received at this table of grace today and every Sunday to receive and taste and feast on the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. That includes the owner in our story today, as well as the manager who squanders, and the debtors who owe the debts. All are welcomed at the table of grace that is our Lord's table.

Yes this is a story of God's forgiveness and generosity. Of God loving us despite our flaws. It is a love story indeed that keeps us near the cross, where love and mercy find us in Jesus Christ, and welcome us all. Amen. Thanks be to God.