

Luke 16:1-13 – “The Economics of Grace” – Sept 18/16

In spite of all my reactions I still am drawn into watching the train wreck otherwise known as the Presidential Election in the USA. For the most part the media presents an unending stream of blah-blah-blah, but the other day one panelist (I apologize for forgetting her name) on Don Lemon’s show on CNN came forth with what I thought was a brilliant analysis: she decried the actions of the media (including herself) for the bizarre activity of “parsing the absurd”. Her point was that it is an impossible task, applying rigid logic to that which is absurdly illogical.

Our task this morning is not quite so impossible, but we do face a huge uphill challenge in making some sense of what we just heard from Luke’s gospel. The challenge arises not so much because the text is complicated but rather because the story is superficially familiar and this familiarity tends to obscure the real meaning and message. In preaching on this text I have a huge uphill battle getting you to dismiss preconceived ideas about the text so you can hear its message with fresh ears. This task is made more difficult by the fact that our pew bibles (and indeed most other bibles, except the Children’s Bible which ducks the issue completely) have a title for this section of text that is at best confusing, and at worst completely wrong. That title? “The Parable of the Dishonest Manager.” (There’s a whole sermon series on why you should be EVER so suspicious about those inserted section titles – recognizing that they are someone’s interpretation – but I won’t go too deeply into that other than to get you thinking about it!) Recognize especially that even before you even begin reading the actual text your mind is pre-conditioned to view the manager in a particular light – you can hardly help reading it without thinking of the manager as being dishonest. But the truth is we don’t know his background - perhaps he was dishonest in other places. But if that’s how you think of him you’ll likely find yourself confused by the example and the message, asking, “what is this all about?” “What kind of message comes from rewarding a dishonest manager?”

So, let’s back up a bit, take a deep breath, and clear up some of the confusion by changing that title. You’ve probably heard me say we should change the title of the “Parable of the Prodigal Son” to the “Parable of the Forgiving Father”, and in the same way, and for the same reasons we should change the title of this text from “The Parable of the Dishonest Manager” to “The Parable of the Shrewd Manager”. Someone – we’ll never know who – labeled the manager as dishonest in the text, and the same label was later added to scripture as a section title. As a consequence our view of both the manager and the parable has been clouded ever since. That one act of labeling the manager as dishonest puts a spin on the text that is pretty much the opposite of what the rest of the text itself is saying, so there’s no wonder that we get confused.

When we do actually read the text with an open mind about the manager, we discover that the charges against him were neither that he was dishonest nor that he was cheating or stealing from his master. The charges that were brought to the master against the manager were that “he was squandering the master’s property”. Now squandering has a whole different connotation than stealing – squandering more implies wastefulness, bad management, poor choices. The elements of willful theft, of deliberate intent to defraud are absent from that charge; instead the charge against the manager is of not doing his job properly, of not being careful with the resources under his command.

“But look what he did!”, you might protest, describing his actions at retro-actively providing price reductions to customers – a 50% reduction for oil, a 20% reduction for wheat. Now, if you are pre-conditioned to think of him as ‘dishonest’, you cannot help but see him as somehow cheating the master out of what was owed to him. If, however, you realize that as manager he most likely had full authority to set prices on commodities such as oil and wheat, then he was perfectly within his authority to adjust invoices. With that different perspective you can perhaps begin to see how and why the master commended the manager for being so shrewd, instead of firing him.

Incidentally, that is another popular misconception about this parable – most people assume that the master fired the manager, which is not accurate (it is almost necessary to believe he was fired if one tries to hold on to him being ‘dishonest’, so that may be why they do so). The master, upon hearing the charges brought against the manager (don’t you ever wonder who brought the charges, or why – was it a personal grudge, someone who wanted the manager’s job, a scheming customer?), upon hearing those charges the master asked his manager for “an accounting of your management”. That’s more like, “tell me why I shouldn’t fire you” instead of adopting Donald Trump’s bad comb-over and uttering the now-famous words (“You’re Fired”).

Being challenged to account for his actions gave the manager an opportunity to display his managerial style, and display his shrewdness he did, and the compliments began to roll in from the customers. Now the master was well pleased with the long-term prospects of good customer relations and continuing prosperity and the manager was commended for being shrewd, instead of being fired.

Ahh ... now we can begin to see the point of the parable – commendation for being shrewd in business – and how it fits with the rest of the instructions gathered and presented here. Now perhaps we can also see how the collection of one-liners that Luke has gathered together with this parable serve to reinforce that main point of being shrewd. Some of these sayings have lost a little clarity over the years, but that happens with one-liners. Can you imagine, for example, trying to analyze the old saying, “a penny saved is a penny earned”? That saying worked well when a penny was a significant amount of money, when you could actually buy something with a penny. Today the marginal cost of handling the penny results in a net loss of several cents or more, and as a result the penny has even been dropped from circulation! We have to be somewhat cautious that we don’t get into the same kind of over-analysis of the one-liners here.

And when we avoid getting too picky we also begin to see how all these pieces fit together and we begin to understand what was really being said. The basic point of the parable is about the economics of faith - that it’s good to be shrewdly beneficent – and the parable is followed by several short sayings: injunctions for the followers of Jesus to be at least as canny and shrewd with the gifts that God has given us, as well as some reminders about why we should be canny and shrewd. There’s also a warning about not getting sidetracked into thinking that it is money Jesus that is talking about. Now that’s fairly straightforward and simple, isn’t it? If that’s all we got out of this text we would have some good advice.

But I think there’s more here – a subtle message in the parable that gets so tangled up with and trod upon so heavily by the ‘dishonest’ problem that we miss it entirely, and that’s a pity because it is a message so consistent with the rest of what Jesus had to say that it seems to me at least that it must have been an essential part of what Jesus was trying to tell his listeners. That message is the ‘upside-down’ nature of God’s grace. What the manager did in reducing the outstanding invoices was unusual, to say the least. Whatever his motives (and hence the need for some cautions to go with the parable) the action of the manager in reducing the outstanding invoices was a kindness to the affected customers. The customers received these small mercies through no action or merit of their own – it was a gift out of the blue. The parallel with the grace of God as proclaimed by Jesus is too clear to ignore. Jesus declared time and time again that the mercy of God is conferred upon us not because we earn it, not because we deserve it, but simply because it is offered to us.

There is a further clear parallel between the reactions of the customers visited by the mercy of the manager and the reactions expected of us in return for the grace and mercy offered by God in Christ. Just as those customers surely must have expressed their appreciation to the master for his largess through the manager (why else would he have been so pleased?), surely we too are called to offer our thanks and soul-felt appreciation to God for his mercies to us.

If we are being urged in this text to be shrewd, to applaud the manager's example of "thinking outside the box", what then are we being called to do? What is the model for living out our faith? I would suggest we are being called to 'manage' the gift of grace we have been given. Just as we have been given mercy and forgiveness by God, not because we are worthy, or deserving, or talented or skilled or even nice, we will demonstrate ourselves to be shrewd if we offer mercy, forgiveness, help, support, our very selves to others in the same way. Not to those who 'deserve' Christian kindness, but to those who need it, we offer tenderness and care. Not to those who have somehow 'earned' our Christian affection, but to those who need to know they are loved, we offer love, in the name of the one who offered God's love to us in himself, even our Lord, Jesus Christ.

There is a final warning that needs to be heard, however, and that is the caution about getting caught up in the shrewdness of the economic world. The parable, while using a common metaphor of the commercial world and ordinary business transactions to show the value of shrewd thinking, should not be seen as a call to treat faith like a business. There is a huge tendency for people, enthusiastic in the faith, to fall into using a business model for the church. The gospel becomes a product, evangelizing begins to look astonishingly like good sales and marketing, statistics and management meetings become a new liturgy, the senior pastor starts to look more like a CEO than a country parson. There is a huge danger in getting swallowed up in chasing that kind of mammon, and that is losing sight of the scandalous, upside-down, against all ration and reason, nature of God's grace, offered not because our sales team has enough enthusiasm, offered not because enough of those cards and letters keep rolling in, offered not because of slick hair or slick words, offered not because we are getting the "faithful person of the month" award, but God's mercy, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation offered because we are lost, we are sinners, we are in need. These are the true economics of grace.

Finally, with that caution comes the realization that we have a choice to make (which implies, thank God, that the choice is even available!). The caution that we cannot serve two masters reminds us clearly that we need to choose our motives, our targets, our driving force – will we choose the rational, profit-driven, value-for-money or reward-for-value focus of the secular world, or will we choose the it-makes-no-sense-but-thank-God-I'm-eligible message of grace from God? Those are the options – what will be your choice?