

Shrewd Managers; Dishonest Money

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Luke 16: 1-13

Why did Jesus teach with parables? Why not just give us the straight goods: give us the facts as simply and powerfully as possible? That's how you convince people of your way of thinking. Who ever won a debate by telling a story that the listeners had to puzzle over in order to figure out what you were saying? Imagine a candidate for mayor of Toronto employing this kind of strategy.. "Mr. Candidate, what is your view on the plan to push the Allan Expressway to the Lakeshore by building a tunnel under the existing subway line?"

"Well, let's see. A man had two sons. The second son said, "Dad, drop dead. Give me the inheritance you owe me. I'm out of here."

And the reporters say, "Huh. What's he talking about? How do we put that into a 10 second voice clip for the evening news?"

Parables are not the strategy to get you elected to the mayor's office or any other kind of elected office. But of course, Jesus wasn't running for office. He was presenting ideas that attacked everything that the powerful people of his day were doing, ideas that he knew would get him killed if they were presented in the ordinary way. Remember Mark 1:14, which I read last week about the very beginning of Jesus' ministry: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the Good News.' Jesus was following John the Baptist. Maybe he had been one of John's followers. Certainly, Jesus had been baptized by John. We don't know very much about John the Baptist, but one thing that we do know is that he didn't mince words. Listen to what Luke says about John's message: "John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. ... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Luke 3:7-9)

So what happened to John the Baptist? Got himself arrested by Herod, that's what. And then got himself killed in prison. That's the last we hear from John the Baptist. Jesus may have decided that he didn't want to get himself killed, at least not so early in his career that no one would ever have heard about his message. And so he spoke in parables to blunt his message; he spoke in code so that by the time his enemies figured out what he was really saying he had moved on to the next town.

Later on in Luke Jesus told his disciples that "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that looking, they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand." (Luke 8:10) Parables were intended to confuse his enemies.

And that brings us to today's lectionary reading from Luke, one of the most challenging parables in all of scripture. A steward is accused of squandering his master's property. We don't know who laid these charges, but the master believes them and fires the steward. Losing your patron like this in Roman times

was essentially a death sentence, both for the person fired and for his family and any other dependants as well. No employment insurance back then, no social safety net – just manual labour or begging in the streets.

So what does the manager do. He has to act quickly for as soon as word gets out that he is losing his job any influence he has had over his master's clients and debtors will be gone. So he calls them in, one at a time to each thinks that he alone is being granted a great gift. To one he reduces his debt from 100 jugs of oil to fifty jugs. A "jug" of oil is the produce of about 15 olive trees or 8-9 gallons, the yield of one small family farm. Jesus' audience of poor people listening to this parable would be gob-smacked trying to imagine the wealth associated with 50 jugs of oil. Having your debt reduced by this much was like winning the lottery. Another debtor owed 100 containers of wheat, where a container is the produce of about an acre of land, again the produce of a single family farm in the region. His debt is reduced from 100 containers to eighty. The master has enormous wealth to be able to make such loans and the debtors must have had substantial assets to have been judged worthy of carrying debts of this magnitude.

Remember now that none of these debtors know anything about the precarious status of the steward, and they will all assume that the steward is acting under the instructions of his master. Obviously, no steward would do such a thing with his master's assets on his own. So, when the debtors meet the steward's boss at the equivalent of the National Club downtown, they would be falling all over him with gratitude, buying him drinks, praising him to the skies. Then they will discover that they were not alone in receiving these great gifts since all the debtors were called in and had their bills reduced. The debtors will now be falling all over one another in their very public praise of the steward's master, who of course knows nothing about any of this. He would be furious of course, but what can he do? One debtor has nominated him for the equivalent of the Order of Canada; another has offered his gorgeous daughter in marriage; a third has told him how he can arrange it for him to buy a piece of property on the seacoast he has coveted for years. The master has been thoroughly snookered by his employee. Not only does he have to keep him as his steward, but he probably has to give him a raise. In retrospect, he will be seen as a great man, generous to a fault, a leader in his community.

This parable is a great story about weakness overcoming strength, the employee getting the better of his employer, and evil person being forced to be generous, a rich man forced to give up some of his wealth. But what does this story tell us about the Kingdom of God?

For this we have to look at the sayings at the end of the parable.

"The children of this age are more shrewd than the children of light." Why can't the church do things a little smarter than we do? Why can't we think outside the box; why can't we be faithful with the very little that we have, instead of complaining that we don't have enough.

"If you have not been faithful with dishonest wealth, who will entrust you with the true riches?" We have to admit that we are all recipients of dishonest wealth, money that is connected with the ways of the world and opposed to the Kingdom of God. I read somewhere that every single congressional district in the United States is dependent in some way to the expenditures of the U.S. military. If it isn't headquarters of the national guard, it is a storage depot or the location of a missile silo. In "Everything must change" Brian McLaren estimates that the basic needs of the entire world's poor could be met by diverting only 10 per cent of the U.S. military budget to international aid and development. But it won't happen because all the

members of the U.S. Congress would lose their jobs. In Canada we aren't so dependent on military spending so we should be able to do better. Can we be more faithful with our dishonest wealth – money made by participating in the systems of civilisation in which we are immersed? Jesus suggests that this is how we bring in the Kingdom of God. We cannot serve both God and wealth. Notice that this doesn't mean that we can have wealth, just that we cannot serve it. We have to find ways for our wealth to serve us.

One of the lessons I have learned from this parable of the shrewd manager is that we cannot give up in the face of seemingly unsolvable problems. There is always something we can do. We will shortly have a Board meeting to discuss the various challenges that we are facing here in the church. Some of our problems do seem impossible to solve, but we also have some great advantages and assets if we can figure out how to use them. The work goes on. If everyone can discover their gifts and find ways to creatively use them to bring in the Kingdom of God then the world will be a better place. That, it seems to me to be what following Jesus looks like in our day.

Thanks be to God..

Amen