

Sermon Notes Sept. 18th, 2022

Sermon Text: Luke 16:1-13

Scripture, Via “The Message”

1-2 Jesus said to his disciples, “There was once a rich man who had a manager. He got reports that the manager had been taking advantage of his position by running up huge personal expenses. So, he called him in and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? You’re fired. And I want a complete audit of your books.’”

3-4 “The manager said to himself, ‘What am I going to do? I’ve lost my job as manager. I’m not strong enough for a laboring job, and I’m too proud to beg. . . . Ah, I’ve got a plan. Here’s what I’ll do . . . then when I’m turned out into the street, people will take me into their houses.’”

5 “Then he went at it. One after another, he called in the people who were in debt to his master. He said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’”

6 “He replied, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ “The manager said, ‘Here, take your bill, sit down here—quick now—write fifty.’”

7 “To the next he said, ‘And you, what do you owe?’ “He answered, ‘A hundred sacks of wheat.’ “He said, ‘Take your bill, write in eighty.’”

8-9 “Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

10-13 Jesus went on to make these comments: If you’re honest in small things, you’ll be honest in big things; If you’re a crook in small things, you’ll be a crook in big things. If you’re not honest in small jobs, who will put you in charge of the store? No worker can serve two bosses: He’ll either hate the first and love the second Or adore the first and despise the second. You can’t serve both God and the Bank.

The Sermon

I wrestled with this sermon all week. I did not sit down to start to write this sermon until I took a walk down 3rd Avenue to see the Harvest Fest and admire the car show on Saturday. I was hoping that would help clear my thoughts.

The struggle began on Monday as I read the passages for today and read my first few commentaries on the Gospel passage because I wanted to continue our journey together through Luke. Then, on Tuesday morning, before the bible study began, a suggestion was given to not focus on the parable and use the added-on instructions. That sure would be the easy route. However, after the study, I know that I needed to wrestle with the text. Hopefully, my wrestling will be proven fruitful and there are nuggets of true that will help you and help us a church.

I imagine that after hearing the text, you were thinking that this passage is quite perplexing. It is a perplexing story anyway, because **Jesus is trying to teach his disciples something about how they should live and act, but he’s doing it from a story in which none of the characters are examples of moral integrity.** Then, it seems that we are suppose to learn from the dishonest manager who was shrewd.

Maybe, it can help us to realize that are times, parables can be seen as more a snapshot of real life. Sometimes, I think we tend to see Jesus using parables to portray an ideal fantasy which lifts up a sound moral and godly principle and point to everyone else as a villain. I think that many times, Jesus wants us to take a look at the world and realize that our world is a messy one and, in the world, there is much confusion. Then, what can we learn through the perplexing times.

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There are multiple ways that this story can be interpreted. Just like an easy out in the sermon would be to preach the words of instructions at the end of the passage, the easy out in the interpretation would be the following:

The manager was simply cutting out the interest and also cutting out his take on the transaction. Thus, he was simply collecting the fee that was needed for his owner. The manager in discounting the bills and doctoring the books is simply a route to make friends for himself; so, when he no longer has a job, he can ask for a favor.

I do not believe this is the case. There is more to the story.

Let's take a look at the parable, again.

There are two main characters that are in this story. We have a rich boss and a manager that has engaged in suspect business activities. He has gotten himself fired.

Now, if you are familiar with the stories that Jesus shared, when he shares a story about a rich man, then you can almost be assured that he is the worst character in the story. However, the business manager is accused of abusing his position, and to get himself out of trouble, he perpetrates a further series of frauds against his employer.

Jesus labels him as **dishonest**.

Now, here is where the story begins to get perplexing. Jesus turns around and tells his disciples that on at least one count they don't measure up to this dishonest manager and would do well to take some notes from him.

Now, it is very important to realize that Jesus makes no excuses for the man's behavior. On the contrary, he makes sure that this is an example of a person from "the other side" — one of the "children of this world" as opposed to the "children of the light". Yet, he wants them to learn something from him. What could they possibly learn?

He wants them to be as shrewd and creative in our thinking about how to do the works of light as the dishonest manager was in doing works of selfishness, greed and deceit.

Today's parable is about shrewdness.

Could it be that Jesus is sharing about the ability to deal creatively with the cards that life deals us? So, the parable is not lifting up the manager's dishonesty as an example, it is showing us how he was creative and inventive. Maybe, we as Christians and churches could benefit if we were as creative and inventive as the manager was in the story. Our cause is greater and we are motivated by the Spirit of God. **We need to be wise and creative with our energy, time, resources and our imagination as we live out our baptismal promises.**

It is tough, but through our promises, we must take a stand. We must remember that we follow a Christ who overturned the tables in the temple when there were injustices that were occurring. Our Jesus took unbelievable blows at the cross to break the individuals who were wielding power. We have a Christ that was willing to share tough stories that held onto hard truths. If we are willing to be tough enough to tackle all that stands in our way through the wise choices of our time, energy and resources; Christ will walk with us. Our path may be unknown, but Christ will be there.

Week by week as we gather here to worship, Jesus address us through tough stories. They intersect with our real-life situations. We can be challenged and they may even disturb and discomfort us. This is especially true when it comes to us from characters that we find reprehensible and morally indefensible.

I think Jesus told stories, and trusted the Holy Spirit to do with them whatever was needed in the hearts and minds of each hearer, and good stories are always multi-levelled.

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Throughout the week, I have read commentators taking various angles on this story. This morning, I have attempted to take a look at this through one angle. We will see where I go in three years when this comes back to us. Hopefully, the Holy Spirit can breathe gospel into our hearts and minds.

Here is what changed my angle, last evening. I looked at this story in the full context of Luke. This story is immediately after the Prodigal Son. They seem to be extremely different, yet there is a common theme.

Squandering the Property. Both the youngest son and the business manager were squanderers. In both stories, they have a conversation with themselves. They ask, “what will I do now? I know what I will do...” Both of them are then trying to do is come up with a plan that will result in them being accepted into homes that they might otherwise have not been welcome in.

Now, the parable of the prodigal son was explicitly addressed to the respectable religious types who were grumbling about Jesus habitually associated with people they had shunned and avoided as godless sinners. In the parable, Jesus casts these pious grumblers as the persistent and annoying older brother who is oh-so-sure of his own righteousness and who resents mercy and hospitality being shown to the one who deserves it so much less.

So, given that the first story ends on that note, isn't it likely that when we come to this story, Jesus is now continuing his commentary on the respectable religious types and their treatment of everybody else?

Do our behaviors and our attitudes and our obsessions represent God as abundantly loving and merciful and welcoming, or have they made people fear God and feel weighed down by debts to God that they can never repay?

I don't think it is a coincidence that this story is found in the Luke's narrative. The manager forgives debt. Luke is the one who repeatedly equates forgiving sin with forgiving financial debts? Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is quite specific: “forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” So, when faced with the imminent loss of his job, he stops trying to manage all the debts owed to his master, and begins forgiving them, discounting them, writing them off. He is setting people free and giving them a new start. We can ask a lot of questions about his ability to do it but the surprise twist at the end of the story is that he is even commended by his employer.

Jesus is suggesting that there is no such thing as a bad reason to forgive. Forgive because that's what God does. That's what Jesus is all about. Forgive, and you can be sure that is the most faithful representation of God. May we proclaim the good news of God in Christ through this specific word; forgiveness.

Jesus is all about demonstrating the reckless, scandalous and out-of-all-proportion forgiveness of God. This type of forgiveness can lead to accusation of being soft. Let us make sure that we do not sell out the gospel and portray God as a heavenly policeman with a big stick waiting to catch us out in wrongdoing.

Friends, in the end, the only reason any of us can come to the table today because of forgiveness and mercy. The forgiveness that Jesus gives truly is scandalous and it is his signature move.

Jesus forgiveness goes so far, he is not concerned about respectability. Just like the manager, Jesus says, “Here, sit down and let's write off your debt while no one is looking.” Then let's open our homes and our tables so all the forgivers and forgiven can feast at the table of welcome. No wonder they crucified him! And no wonder we celebrate him and worship him forever!

AMEN