

**Sermon**  
**Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay, California**  
**September 18, 2022**  
**Fifteen Sunday After Pentecost**  
**Luke 16:1-13**

The famous German theologian, Rudolf Bultmann, called this parable of the dishonest manager “The Problem Child of Jesus’ parables,” and that “it is impossible to recover its original meaning.” Scholar Phyllis Tickle called it “the most difficult parable of all.” All this because, as you just heard, it seems that Jesus is approving of scheming and dishonesty, and shrewdness and cunning. They might say, is THIS what we mean by the gospel? After telling his disciples that their “yesses” should be “yes” and their “noes” should mean “no” and that they should not lord it over others or be overly concerned about their wealth, ...after all this, we now have Jesus telling a story, TO HIS DISCIPLES, of how a landowner commended his servant/manager/steward for cheating him with cleverness? Where, then, is the gospel?

So I determined, early on in my study of the lesson, to concentrate on the last verse of the passage, that we cannot serve both God and wealth, or mammon. Ah, that’s easy, a binary choice! And I found out that Mammon itself had indeed been personified in Jesus’ day, in Greek and then Roman culture, represented by the god Pluto, who through evolutionary development had come to represent both wealth and the underground. And that the two, wealth and the underground, came together because much wealth was created by mining minerals in the ground, and by growing things in the ground. And there was a subtler point that wealth generally had to be hidden, or that wealthy people might always be worrying about what would happen when they die, like we read some months ago in Ecclesiastes, that it was vanity that one person would work to amass a fortune, only to cede it to an heir who didn’t have to work at all! What a sermon that

would have been. And what a stark choice, between God and wealth! Alas, that sermon isn't happening this week.

Turns out that this verse, and the others preceding it, including that the children of this age are more shrewd than the children of light, and that you should make friends by means of dishonest wealth so if all goes to hell, at least YOU won't, and being faithful in a little so you'll get more true riches...all that, it has become clear to me, are perhaps independent words of Jesus, or maybe not from Jesus himself, that had become attached to Jesus' parable in the time between when he spoke it and when Luke wrote them down. I know, sounds heretical. But Martin Luther made a point that there is a gospel within the gospel, and that the central message of the gospel – grace, freedom, love, utter dependence upon God – judges all other parts of scripture. Not every word of the Bible is equal.

I read the words of one commentator that the dishonest manager's actions of lowering the debts of the debtors was his attempt to get right with God, that he considered himself to be in peril by standing outside God's grace at that time. Well, in my small Lutheran brain, that's just craziness. If God is for us, then who can be against us? Ourselves? I don't think so. Might our choices be against us? Well, the parable of the Lost Son in the previous chapter puts that possibility to the lie. Our evil occupations? Not that either. So what might be a grace-filled interpretation of this parable, ignoring the possibilities raised from the second half of verse eight on to the end of verse thirteen? I think I know. (And for what it's worth, I think the REAL impossible parable is the one from two weeks ago, that you can't become Jesus' disciple unless, contrary to the fourth commandment, you hate your father or mother.)

So here's what I think, based on the ideas of some very good commentators. First, we shouldn't be calling this parable the Dishonest Manager. This word that is translated as

“dishonest” is *adikos* and *adikia*, being the adjective and noun forms of the same word. The first letter, *a*, means “not,” as in the difference between moral and amoral. The second parts, *dikos* and *dikia*, are from the root for our word “righteous,” *dikaios*. Yes, this very important word can also mean upright, good, just, proper, and yes, honest. Way down the list, we see “honest.” But to my mind, to call the manager *adikos* means that this manager, this steward, is not so much dishonest as unrighteous, or perhaps even more correctly, unreligious. He doesn’t know God, nor cares much to know about God. This manager, who takes care of the estate of a much richer landowner, is, above all, just practical.

It is not even clear if he is dishonest. What does the parable say? That charges were brought to the rich person that this manager was squandering his property. These were charges from someone else! So the owner demands to see the accounts, and then the manager will be fired. Well, let’s look at the squandering charge. It’s not clear what it is. It might be that the manager is not collecting the accounts. It couldn’t have meant that the manager is charging too much for the accounts to pocket them. That wouldn’t be cheating the owner. That would be cheating, probably, the tenants. The tenants who were farming the land and owe the owner the wheat and olive oil, as a share of their crops. Maybe this is not a dishonest manager, but a compassionate manager, going easy on the tenants, easier than was common practice. Hey, the anonymous accusers say, Landowner, you should be getting a greater profit from this land than your manager is bringing in! You need to get a more ruthless manager! Of course, this is not what our lesson says, outright, but it could easily have been in Jesus’ mind. The accusers accuse the manager of squandering the owner’s property, of passing on less than it is worth. Makes sense to me.

So what does this manager do, in the face of his impending dismissal, knowing that he is not fit for the field or for begging at the city gate? He does what he is empowered to do by his position. He goes to the debtors and what? He lowers their debt level...which by the way, is absurdly high. The people who heard the parable originally, they understood its absurdity. And they also understood how important the lowering of their debt was, and how grateful those tenants would be for the kindness.

What word do we generally use for the lowering of debt, or in the case of countless former college students, whose debt in part or in whole has been cancelled? What do we call the action of those who cancel or lower the debt. They are doing what to the debt? Yes, that's right, you got it. They are forgiving the debt! Forgiving, releasing, making null and void, letting go, leaving, dismissing. This unreligious manager is practicing forgiveness. You know how important THAT is to Jesus, right?

Let's also consider this. The manager has it in mind to become friends, not with the rich landowner, but with the tenant farmers. The manager is not aspiring to have his or her fortunes raised, but simply to make friends who now owe him a great debt of gratitude. In my mind, he or she is not intending to become a manager for someone else, but is planning on undergoing a great change of status. Kind of becoming humbler, perhaps because, having become aware of how people in different social strata behave themselves, he is preferring the lower status folks.

Doesn't this interpretation put a different light on things? Do you think like me that not only the disciples who remembered and passed on this parable, or that most likely attached their own interpretations to it, or the countless translators and commentators since then, might have gotten this whole interpretation thing wrong? Or might you think like me that with this different way of looking at the impossible parable, it becomes reasonable for Jesus, in the middle of his

walk to the cross, to want to emphasize the importance of forgiveness? And in his humble way, would want to point out that someone outside the pale, could understand both the importance of forgiveness and the relative insignificance of wealth and power? And that, amazingly from a person who is *adikos*, unrighteous, unobservant, nonreligious? If such a person understands the power of forgiveness, how about you? You disciples, who are going to have a profound need to forgive yourselves and others?

This is indeed the “impossible parable” if we don’t get beyond some preconceptions that seem to have been passed down over millennia. The very kind of preconceptions that Jesus himself was seeking to reveal and counter by his welcoming of sinners into his fellowship. You see that person over there, Jesus is hinting at, whom you perceive to be unworthy? They might not be. Perhaps they will get into God’s realm ahead of you! Not to say that you won’t be there, but their way to repentance and change of heart, and their comprehension of the good news might be easier than yours.

The parables, if anything, were meant by Jesus to give us pause, to examine our assumptions, to cause us to doubt what we consider to be righteousness, to widen the catchment basin of grace, to bring people in, where Jesus can sort them out. Which means really that Jesus isn’t going to do any sorting that we haven’t done already. That Jesus will be Prodigal with love. That is, as in “lavish”, not “wasteful.” That Mercy will observe no rules, no entrance fees, no showing of proof of worthiness, no good works, no *vitae*, no list of assets, no recommendations. Not even a desire to be right with God, or, if you can believe, a thirsting after righteousness. Not even a recognition of what we are being given in Jesus. Though it doesn’t hurt to know what we’re being given. Life, overflowing.

It is a pitfall of the religious life, that, as with the words of last week's hymn, "But we make [God's] love too narrow by false limits of our own; and we magnify its strictness with a zeal God will not own." If you've got a church, we think, it should be a good church, with good people in it, who are doing good things. Yes, that may be important. But more than that, a church is a hospital for those who know they are sick. More than a place for being good, it is a clinic for those who need healing. More than a place to brag about, it is a place where forgiveness and mercy abound. That is a church, which by the way, in its Greek sense, means "belonging to the Lord." I know. It sounds impossible.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber      September 17, 2022