

15 Pentecost, Proper 20, 2019
September 22, 2019
Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC

Amos 8:4-7 Psalm 113 1 Timothy 2:1-7 Luke 16:1-13

The dishonest manager or the shrewd steward?

Earlier this week I commented that my answer to any question you might ask me about this parable is: “I don’t know.” That comment is not completely true, but I can say that no one now knows exactly what Jesus meant when he shared this parable with his disciples. We, as preachers and Christians, are given the task of finding the Good News in an unclear situation, not unlike environments in which we find ourselves every day.

What is clear is that this manager is fired. The manager, or steward, is probably the middle person between field workers/tenants staying on an absentee landowner’s property. The manager, who may well have defrauded the tenants, is about to be dependent on those same people. In his own words, he is not strong enough to dig, that is, to do manual work for a living. Digging often meant working in mines, with a high risk of death. He knows how to with numbers. He also cannot envision himself reaching down the social ladder to beg for sustenance. The manager must come up with a way for people to like him so that they will provide for him.

So in this interpretation of the parable, the manager has been marking up the bills for commodities such as olive oil and wheat, making outrageous profits for himself and/or for the landowner. Here he is the dishonest manager. He has not quite broken the laws of Moses by charging interest (usury) for payments owed, but has done so by means of overcharging for these goods. If the tenants do not pay exorbitant bills, they will lose their homes and livelihood. The “shrewd steward” ingratiates himself to the tenants by reducing the bills to an amount closer to the amount owed. The tenants are happy with a reduced bill, the manager/steward, both dishonest and shrewd, might be allowed to stay in their homes as they show gratitude to him – he saved their family, right? We would expect the landowner to be furious – look at the money he has lost!

In an unimaginable twist in the story, the landowner praises the steward! It sounds as if Jesus is advocating an “everyone wins with corrupt business practices,” but I would hope that is not the point of a parable. Some scholars assert that the correct interpretation of the parable is to define/redefine who’s speaking. “And 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”

are the words of the landowner. The landowner is expressing approval of the dishonest manager's action, emphasizing that both master and manager are corrupt.

It is Jesus who then says:

“Whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust you to the true riches?”

The interpretation utilizing who is speaking tells us that the kingdom of God, our eternal home, is not available for those who cannot be trusted in the management of this life. We are not rewarded for the evil schemes that we enact now. It is not okay to trample on those less fortunate than we are. It is not okay to falsify our business dealings with others, thereby creating thankfulness where none is deserved.

Jesus' question hits hard: “If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” If we earn our living dishonestly in this life, we put at risk our delight in the true riches of heaven, the heaven on earth for which we pray. (There is more)

Jesus continues: “¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?” Everything that we have is “what belongs to another,” because the “another” is God. Our riches are a gift from God; our talents and our money are of God and they belong to God. Our gift of reading, music, expertise at sports, organizational skills – all belong to God. We are the caretakers of these gifts and are called to manage everything that God has given us. “What is our own” is the gift of eternal life with God. Our prior weeks' stories about being lost and found tie in to this week's message. What is our own is our ever-seeking God who will not abandon us, who will not stop searching for you/us, God's most precious lamb/coin/child until God takes us triumphantly into God's arms and brings us home, here and in the life to come.

Now stretch a little. In our everyday lives we are already the dishonest manager, the shrewd steward. “We, too, are about to be fired (workingpreacher.org, 2016).” How will we caretake our life, our common life, and all of creation? I cannot abide with this parable's meaning being only about judgment. We have a loving God, as we have been hearing in past weeks.

A gospel ultimately is about the Good News, and this strange parable is full of Good News. There is nothing usual about God's forgiveness and praise, which is unexpected, over-the-top and unearned. There is nothing logical about forgiving our debts when we have no idea how to forgive our debtors. It makes no sense to “throw a party for people that can't invite you to theirs, leave behind a flock

because one sheep strayed, or throw a party for your good-for-nothing son who finally came back home (<https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper20c>). It makes no sense for Jesus to say *on the cross* to an unrepentant criminal, “today you will be with me in Paradise.” It makes no sense that today+ years after witnesses found an empty tomb, 2000 we experience the real presence of Christ in bread and wine at this table ... but in God’s forgiveness and mercy and total love for God’s creation – for me and for you, we do.

God loves you. God yearns for you. God steps in to forgive even the unforgiveable, turning all of creation upside down in generosity, love, and grace.

Thanks be to God!