

Luke 16: 1-13; Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7 – “Be a little clever” Sermon Sept. 22

Lord, please bless these words and our understanding. Amen.

When Pastor Lance asked me if I might preach, I said I was happy to do it. But, later on when we knew what the scripture for this Sunday was, he said that he hadn't done me any favors by giving me this Luke text. “A very difficult one”, he said. And, once I read through it, I understood why he said that. A difficult passage indeed! Of all the great parables to choose from, I got this one: the Parable of the Dishonest Manager!

Jesus, speaking to his disciples, tells a parable of a rich man who had a manager who looked after his property. And, at some point someone told this rich man that the manager was squandering his property. Upset by the charges, the rich man sent for his manager and asked for an accounting of his management, because he could not be his manager any longer.

By this point, the manager knowing he is in trouble says to himself, what am I going to do now? He's going to take away my job...and I'm not strong enough to do another job, like digging and I am too ashamed to go beg. So the manager decided to do something to ensure that when he loses his job, he'll still have friends on his side who will open their homes and arms to him once he's jobless. The manager decides to be clever, cunning, and shrewd. His deceitful plan was to call in all of those people in debt to his boss, ask how much they owed his master, and then reduce the amount, often by a great deal, so even though he would soon lose his job, all those he'd help by greatly reducing their debts would now be indebted to him.

Now, I find this parable quite ambiguous. We don't know who reported this manager to the rich man or why. It's unclear if he actually was mismanaging his boss' property before he was even reported. In fact, during the first half of the parable, I find it quite telling that Jesus simply called him a manager and only after his choice to reduce people's debts when his job was threatened was he called a dishonest manager. Yes, he reduced the debts of others to gain their favor, but I wonder if his master was an honest business man to begin with. Could the debts he held over others have been unfair in any way? And, in reducing people's debts, could this manager possibly have been restoring ill-gotten gain to their rightful owners, putting back into balance that which was previously economically unfairly imbalanced? We don't know. Jesus doesn't answer these questions and, as you can see, potentially there is a lot we don't fully know about this story. And, then there is the question of certain words later on within the scripture, which depending on its translation, could greatly change the meaning of the text. And, if we knew these details, how would our view of this narrative change?

But, what we do know, from the main story of the parable, is that the manager did finally have to show his boss the accounts. He had to own up to what he had done and face his boss. Now, if any of us were this rich man being handed proof in our hands of how this dishonest manager cheated and swindled us, I imagine the first thing out of our mouths would not be praise but curses. In the real world, we are more likely to be angry about having lost what was owed to us, rather than applauding the dishonest manager's ingenuity for his self-preservation.

But, this is not the real world we're talking about here. This is a parable told by Jesus! And, this parable is meant to teach the disciples (and hopefully us) a lesson. Jesus said that the rich man commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. He admired...even approved the shrewd and clever actions of this dishonest manager. REALLY? WHY?

What is Jesus trying to tell his disciples and us with this parable? That it's ok to steal, perhaps, or to be dishonest? That it's fine to cheat other people as long as we serve our own interests or goals? Now, do you see why Pastor Lance said he did me no favors by giving me this text to preach on?

But, don't be too confused by Jesus' parable yet, because that wasn't where the story ended. Jesus continued the story by giving an explanation to his disciples. He said that the "children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light." Jesus seems to be trying to relate a specific message to his disciples – not that dishonesty is fine, but rather perhaps implying that Jesus' followers, who here are called the children of the light, could actually learn something from the astute ingenuity that He says are often demonstrated by people of the world...people like this shrewd manager who finds a way to get what he needs by using his clever brain.

This parable reminds me of a story my mother once told me about her childhood. As one of 18 children in her household in Mexico, her family was understandably quite poor. Her parents, kept a tight leash on their money probably to conserve the little they had, and would never give my mother five cents...even when she asked for things she really needed...necessary things like clothes, and certainly not for things she wanted, like the candy she so often saw her friends able to buy when she could not. At one point, she had finally had enough of being told she could not have money to buy the every-day items she really needed. On one occasion, her feet were quite cold at night because she had no socks and her parents wouldn't buy them or give her money for them. This is where her story takes a turn to resemble some of the parable: So, as a child, she hatched a dishonest but ingenious plan that worked quite well for her. Their house had quite a few rooms with lightbulbs in it and my mother knew that when one light

would go out, her mother would give her money to go replace it. So, my mother's plan was to replace a working bulb with a broken one (while hiding the working lightbulb in a safe place) so that when her mother saw that the light was out, she would give her money to go buy a new one. My mother then pretended to go buy it, but in actuality, she just screwed in the old working lightbulb back into place and would pocket the money to buy those things she really needed but wasn't being provided by her parents. She told me she saved the broken bulb and used this ploy quite a few times to get some of the most basic essentials that you and I probably never even had to worry about as children. As I think about her story now, I am truly amazed and even admire my mother...I know it was dishonest, and so does she as she even confessed to her parents about it (much later as -an adult), but to think how astonishing that out of necessity as a little girl, she was driven to think shrewdly regarding how to get what she needed when her parents didn't provide those things for her. She was shrewd, and though we know it was a dishonest act, are you not as impressed by her cleverness as I am? She used what little she had in such a way that could gain her what she needed. A clever use of the brain God gifted her with indeed!

Verse 9 of today's scripture, alludes to this kind of cleverness, specifically the manager's shrewdness when Jesus says, "use your worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Here, Jesus makes it clear that in life, wealth or mammon is not to be our main focus...wealth is simply a convenient tool. The main goal, however, is heaven. The worldly, shrewd manager used wealth and possessions strategically as a tool in order to gain what he wanted- to safeguard his future. And, in verse 8, when Jesus says that his followers, the people of the light, do not tend to be as shrewd as worldly people in dealing with people of their generation, I don't believe Jesus is telling us that we do not have the capacity to be as astute or clever as people of the world tend to be. But rather, that where people of the world might use that cleverness to follow their own self-seeking objectives, people of the light have an opportunity to use that cleverness for something far greater. Where people of the world place mammon as the focus of their actions, Jesus instead teaches his followers, time and time again, to not follow the path of the world- to not have a love of money, of mammon. In fact, in verse 13 Jesus says "No one can serve two masters; Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

Jesus seems to imply that we can admire and even learn something from a person's cleverness and ingenuity, especially if we can put that kind of cleverness and ingenuity to work for the

benefit of God's kingdom...for the benefit of others, for those in need. And yet, we would need to be careful here in using our cleverness, gifts and mammon, so that we are not led onto a road to idolize mammon and value that over God's kingdom.

As Christians, we are living in two polar realities. Our humanity ties us to this physical world where we are affected by our physical realities, in a world where having or not having money does affect us and the way we live. But, as Christians, claimed as God's children through our baptism and forgiven through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we are a part of something infinitely greater than this world and the fleeting, empty riches and promises it has to offer. In Christ, we are promised an eternal home that is not of this world and that we aspire to reach, but it is only open to us through Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life.

Jesus understood these polar realities quite well...he was a living example of it...he was both divine and human. He knew all about these dual forces at play...the reality of the world vs. the reality of heaven. And, He told his disciples this parable knowing that they would be going out into the world to minister to people of the world. Perhaps he wanted prepare and inspire them to be clever to use whatever they had in their spiritual and intellectual arsenals in order to win the hearts of those they'd be preaching to...hearts that have often been hardened by doubt, anger, fear, indifference and unbelief. Jesus knew the world is not an easy place to minister to and that his disciples would face many obstacles. Growing churches throughout many lands where people worship other gods, would be incredibly difficult, especially when faced with death and persecution and they would have to find ways to use their wits to navigate through that. Perhaps he wanted them - not to be dishonest - but to be a little shrewd, a little clever, just like that manager or like my mother as a child...because most likely they'd need to use all their spiritual gifts, including the brain and good sense God gifted them with, to get to where they needed to be...to be successful in their mission to spread the good news of God in a world that often values money, mammon over God.

As it is, we too have our own individual mammon, our worldly wealth, that we manage...we each have been entrusted with various spiritual gifts and talents as well...the question is, will we use them well or not...will we manage them well, even shrewdly and cleverly at times, hopefully with a Christ-centered purpose that might bring others and ourselves a bit closer to God? When we are faithful with what God has entrusted us with, it opens us up to the true riches Jesus speaks of, helping us step more firmly onto the path to that promised kingdom of God. Amen.