

Message: "Questionable Ethics"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 16:1-13

16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' ³ Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' ⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' ⁷ Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' ⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Naw, nope, I'm twisting this scripture lesson this way and that, looking at it sideways and longways and upside down and inside out.....but no matter how I twist and turn this passage, I cannot help think that Jesus was having a bad parable day. In other words, there's something really wrong about the message he is trying to get across....and I'm having a hard time trying to squeeze a message worthy of life out of it. Perhaps you are as well?

It makes me wonder...Did you ever think that Jesus just simply got it wrong?

Every now and then, I get myself into trouble as a preacher. My reaction to today's scripture may get me fired, in fact, for here, in this passage, I think Jesus gets it wrong. (I'm watching for lightening bolts). Why would I dare make such a statement? Before anyone walks out, my assessment of this passage and the message Jesus seems to be pointing out has most scholars agreeing with me - they've even given this parable a title, "Commending the dishonest steward," which directly implies the affirmation of dishonesty. And it only gets worse the further you read; it's hard to escape the conclusion that this parable is an ethical mess!

I don't know about you, but I had it drilled into my mind and heart as a child, and my children had it drilled into their minds and hearts when they were young, that dishonesty is not acceptable; tell the truth, do not hide what happened, let us know what's going on, otherwise we won't know how to help, what to think, or otherwise can't be there to support you. We need to know what's really going on. We have never commended dishonesty, and likely never will.

But is this a parable that actually commends dishonesty? Or is it one that affirms shrewdness of a very particular kind? Upon deeper reflection, I do think Jesus is onto a more profound truth that involves how to be more fully human - but it can be quite a circuitous route to get there.

A rich man had a manager who stole funds from his boss; the boss finds out, and tells him to settle whatever he was working on and clear out his office because he's fired. The manager realizes his predicament - he's too old to enter the workforce, too proud to beg....so, in that last day in his office, he decides to cook the books in his customer's favor. Cutting what they owed the master by 20% and even 50%, he gains their favor, he makes some friends. His master finds out what he is doing, cheating him even more.....and commends him for his shrewdness! Do you see the problem here? Is Jesus thinking straight when he posits this tale? What is this parable trying to get across?

It's not made much clearer by continuing to listen to Jesus as he sort of explains the emphasis he intends the parable to give.....Jesus says in verse 9 "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." I would call that questionable advice - make friends through stolen funds? But it gets better in verse 10 -- "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much." I'm with you, Jesus, on this one. But I wish he would have stopped there, for the next verse makes everything muddy again: "If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?" What a mess! The ethics here are all over the place, and I for one find it very confusing.

But then, we hear in verse 13 a return to helpful counsel; Jesus says that "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Amen to that - but what about the rest? What does it mean to be faithful with dishonest wealth? Or make friends with stolen funds? Or a master being impressed by being cheated twice?

How do we deal with this parable?

Is there a sort of Robin Hood morality going on here, where it is somehow OK to steal from the rich to give to the poor?

How do we deal with this parable?

Is there a sort of impure utility constant going on, whereby it is OK to use dishonest gains for honest purposes? I remember the story about a preacher who was handed a bag of stolen cash by a known mobster after church one day, which he gladly received; this horrified the parishioners who witnessed the transaction. "But pastor," said one of the church members, "That money comes from the devil!" The pastor said back to him, "Well, the devil's used it long enough; time for it to be used for God!"

How do we deal with this parable?

Is it possible that the manager lowered the amount owed to his master but made up the difference from his own pocket, thus making both those who were indebted and the master pleased over the outcome? The text doesn't say either way, but perhaps this is why the master was pleased at his shrewdness - he knew how to make friends at all economic levels.

How do we deal with this parable?

Maybe there is a higher truth recognized by the master, even if he remained cheated; he witnessed the importance of nurturing dependable relationships by whatever means. This idea shared by Mary Schertz, a professor of New Testament at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary; she says that "If even a shifty steward realizes that relationships are more important than money, how much more should the children of light realize that "true riches" have to do with relationships rather than wealth or possessions." This would identify closely with Jesus' emphasizing that one cannot serve two masters; one cannot place wealth over relationship and expect relationship to survive.

How do we deal with this parable?

Maybe there's a new way to define adherence to the law? Have you ever heard of the ethics of autonomous practicality? Probably not, for I just made up the term this past week, but you may have a sense of what that phrase means - employ whatever you have a say in towards a higher ethical principle than common law allows. Of course, everything depends upon what is meant by a "higher ethical principle," and this would only work if that principle is defined solely by God.....

How do we deal with this parable?

Can you tell that I don't really have a final answer? I wrote another five pages of sermon outlining possibilities that came to my mind and the mind of other scholars and preachers and professors; none of them are completely satisfactory. And sometimes that's how it is with scripture, with the deliberations of faith, that we struggle to understand, to find answers to the questions that pop up in

life as motivated by the text, and discover that the struggle continues, the questions remain, the answers are incomplete and tenuous. But it is the struggle that keeps it real. I'd rather have a nebulous answer to a meaningful question than an absolute answer to a complex question any day, for it keeps us in appropriate proximity to the divine mystery. It is the mystery of God that disburses revelation essential to life; it is not for us to demand of God answers that fit our desire for absolute clarity.

But I did want to leave you today with an insight into the message of this parable that I found helpful; this comes from Jo Bailey Wells, professor of Old Testament and director of Anglican Studies at Duke Divinity School. She sees in this parable an overturning of intuitive societal order that might just bring us closer to God's perspective on how we humans are invited to organize our society in a new way; she senses that the parable of the dishonest steward is an invitation to change economies. Here are her words:

"The dishonest manager realizes that generosity is the best investment. He gets himself out of a hole by building social capital. It is irrelevant, apparently, that he gives away money that does not belong to him—at least the God-figure in this story does not mind. It's as if the rich man turns to the manager he fired to discover the secret of true riches: generosity.

She continues, saying "It's time to change economies. Forget "my economics": it is time to invest in somebody else's. Forget "my household": it is time to think about other people's households. . . . time to squander that which is squirreled: money should be kept moving. It is time to handle it as the overflow of God's abundant grace: to scatter it freely, to the end of making friends and setting people free—just as God does with his grace."

This parable seen as an invitation to change economies.....Now that is a message I can agree with!