

Is Jesus the Dishonest Manager?

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle

Pentecost 15 Proper 20 Year C 9-22-2019

Scripture: Luke 16:1-8

“1Then 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. 2So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ 3Then 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. 4I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ 5So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ 6He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ 7Then 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.’ 8And 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.”

Sermon: Then Jesus said to the disciples, *“There was a rich man who had a manager...”* Jesus has just told three stories and they all were addressed to the educated religious leaders who thought they were better than everyone else. But Luke points out that this fourth story has a different focus: the disciples.

The disciples want to follow Jesus and have already sacrificed much to do so. They’re heading toward Jerusalem now and they’ve just heard how God delights in the outcast, those we humans look down upon. Jesus clearly doesn’t look at people the same way they do. In handing out God’s love so freely, is Jesus ripping off God? Is he giving away God’s love too cheaply? Does he make it something you don’t have to be better than others to earn? Is Jesus the dishonest manager here?

By Jesus’ day, the vast majority of the population had lost ownership of their land. Roman taxes had become so high, the people fell into debt, and finally were forced to sell their land to pay the taxes. Wealthy people in positions of power bought their land and the farming people thereafter worked for them. The new landowners didn’t want to live on the land. They preferred living in the cities near other wealthy landowners. To run the farms they hired managers and these managers were given great authority to handle the day to day affairs of the farm.

So now we understand the manager in Jesus' story. He's the one caught between the rich, absentee landowner and the resentful farmers. The rich man wants his farm to make money, and the farmers want to keep as much of the fruit of their labor as they can. The manager is between a rock and a hard place with tension that can come from either side, and soon does.

Someone, perhaps an unhappy farmer, brings charges against the manager. This is the only way they can apply force from their side of the labor/management divide. They go over management's head and bring an accusation directly to the owner. They accuse the manager of squandering the land owner's property.

So why is Jesus telling the story this way? Are the disciples in the role of the unhappy farm workers who want bigger take-home for their investment in Jesus, and so charge him, at least in their minds, with misappropriating love and compassion by giving it away too freely? After all, they should be getting more of the good stuff; they are the disciples.

Jesus senses that the disciples are actually siding with the crowds in thinking that bad people don't deserve God's love and delight. In being so inclusive of them, causing them to feel valued and precious, is he giving away God's specialness for nothing, squandering God's wealth uselessly? If this is what the disciples think Jesus is doing, then he is like the dishonest manager and they are bringing charges against him. He shouldn't be giving away something for nothing. They've sacrificed everything to follow him. It's not fair. They're just like the resentful older brother who refuses to welcome home his prodigal younger brother, even though he is his brother. And this, by the way, is the story Jesus told just before he turns to his disciples and tells them our Gospel for today.

Clearly, the disciples aren't happy with Jesus, so he tells this parable in which the land owner summons the manager and says 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.*" If you think about it, this is a strange sequence of events. The land owner asks for an accounting, but then tells him "You're fired" before he can say a word.

Does this remind you of anything? It reminds me of Jesus standing before the hostile crowd that accuses him of terrible things and has no interest whatsoever in whether he's guilty or innocent. He's just guilty and condemned because he's been accepting people he shouldn't be accepting. He's not following the rules about who to exclude, and for that reason, they exclude him. I personally know what this is like. I made the mistake of being too accepting of people of color in two churches I'd served in the past. Oh boy. Was I in deep doo doo after that.

If we take this interpretation, then the owner of the land is us. It's the way of the world. We're the ones who own the world and rule it through the threat of throwing out those we dislike. And in the case of Jesus, we dislike the fact that he

squanders the power of ‘acceptance and exclusion’ by making it useless for controlling people, and the excluders can no longer feel superior to others. If all people are “in” from God’s point of view, how do you threaten anyone with being “out”? In granting grace to all, you squander the master’s power, the master’s means of control, the world’s way of keeping peace through threat of exclusion. This is how the disciples are thinking, and Jesus wants to get inside their world...to subvert it.

So the manager’s been fired, but news of his dismissal hasn’t gotten out yet. What should he do? Is there any way to salvage his situation? He considers his options and realizes he’s not strong enough for hard labor and too proud to beg. But there’s one thing he can do before the news of his firing hits the streets. He can forgive, and forgiveness is such a wonderful thing that people will love him for it, open their hearts to him, and perhaps invite him into their homes after knowledge of his dismissal becomes public.

Is this true? Do we love Jesus because he forgives us? Do we love him enough to invite him into our homes? Do we feel safe in his presence because we know he looks on us with gentle eyes? He knows who we are and he loves us anyway! How good is that! And none of us escape his love, even those who feel most unworthy.

And could it be that the dismissal the story describes is Jesus’ death on the cross? Certainly that’s the place where we dismiss him, accusing him of giving love and forgiveness to those who don’t deserve it. At first we wondered if he might represent God, but then we decided that he didn’t. He doesn’t look anything like the vengeful god we worship. But, it’s too late. The deed is done, and God’s love, even in the midst of our hate, has been revealed. The cat’s out of the bag. History’s been changed. Our debts have already been forgiven.

Well, our love squandering, falsely-accused manager summons the poor and downtrodden people of this world one by one, those who are in so deep they have no hope of ever escaping, and here’s what he does: “*He asks the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’*” Suddenly, the heavily burdened man feels he has a chance. He can cope with fifty. “*Then he asks 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.’*” Even a twenty percent reduction is a huge relief and should leave the debtor with a sense of gratitude.

Now we come to the surprise ending. *“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.”*

Surprisingly, the master commends the dishonest manager. We didn't expect that. But doesn't it say in the New Testament that in the crucifixion God played a trick on us and we fell for it. We exposed ourselves as people who falsely blame and condemn the One most innocent. And then when this innocent, condemned One, forgives us, well...that's it. The whole power game through exclusion is subverted, revealed for what it is, a lie, and made unworkable. If the world can't exclude, how will it survive?

Jesus has just pulled a bait and switch on us. And it has to do with the character of the God we thought we were following. We thought the character of God was demonstrated when he called the manager to an accounting for squandering his power by including everyone and excluding no one. But that way of doing things doesn't come from God at all. It's the way of the world, our way, us being a very cruel god to ourselves. We're the ones who use the threat of exclusion as a way of controlling each other, but it's not God's way. God's way is to love everyone and refrain from crushing anyone. That's why the story commends the “dishonest manager.” The “dishonest manager” shows us the character of Jesus' Abba who loves everyone...regardless.

So, is Jesus the dishonest manager in our Gospel for today? Yes. I think so. From the world's point of view he is, because he freely gives away the very thing the world hordes in order to control people. He gives away forgiveness, and mercy, and love. Gives it away. In doing this, the shrewdness of Jesus reveals a deeper wisdom than the “children of light” think they have.

Have the disciples been thinking of themselves as the “children of light?” Do we? This might explain why Jesus told this parable.

Sources:

NRSV Bible

Sermon by Thomas L. Truby

Sept. 22, 2013