

Luke 16:1-13 (NRSV)

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."

A PARABLE WITH PROBLEMS

Both of my Bible studies last week had the same reaction to this passage. They said, "I don't understand this. What does this mean? What is the point of this story?" They're not the first to have trouble with this passage. Augustine thought that it shouldn't be in the Bible, and commentators down through the ages have struggled down to make sense of this story.

The first problem is the character of the manager. He's dishonest. How can Jesus use a dishonest person as an example of how we should act?

In the parable some people have accused the manager in this parable of mismanagement. We don't know if the accusations were true, but the boss must believe that it is true because he tells him he's fired.

But, unlike most businesses the boss doesn't make him pack up his stuff in a box and leave with security right away. No, his boss tells him to spend his last days on the job creating one more monthly financial report.

This reminds me of something a friend told me about his company. They decided to outsource all of their computer work to a firm located in India. And the employees who would be losing their jobs were responsible for training these new employees by phone and the Internet.

I asked him if his bosses weren't worried that the employees on the way out might put some bugs into the process as a way of taking their revenge. He just shrugged his shoulders and said that they hadn't talked about that problem.

Apparently the boss in our parable for today should have been concerned about sabotage because that's exactly what the dishonest manager does. He uses his last days on the job for his own benefit.

He summons all his master's debtors and then proceeds to take less than is owed. In this way he hopes to feather his own nest after he's fired. He tells the debtors, "Do you owe a hundred dollars? Right down fifty on this bill, and we'll call it even."

In essence he's using somebody else's money to ingratiate himself to other people. Since he's too old to dig ditches and too proud to beg, he hopes that those who have gotten a good deal might help him out when he's out on the street. Maybe they'll give him a place to live.

Now the boss finds out what this dishonest manager has been doing. We think that we know what is coming. We think that we know what the boss is going to do.

He's going to say, "The cops will be here soon. This is embezzlement. You're not going to get away with this."

But, no, it doesn't happen that way. Instead the Scripture tells us that the boss "commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly." Is that not the craziest story you've ever heard?

And it gets worse. Jesus then says, "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." Luke 16:9 (NRSV)

That's a new wrinkle on a stewardship program. Suppose I told you that you that it didn't make any difference how you got your money. The main thing you needed to do was to use that money to make friends who would help you in your time of need. That sounds like something from the Godfather or the Sopranos. In order to survive, a man's got to do what a man's got to do.

No wonder St. Augustine wanted to expunge this parable from the Bible. The difficulties seem well nigh impossible to overcome. And I'm not going to tell you this morning that I can smoothly finesse all the objections you might have to this parable.

A PARABLE AND NOT A MORALITY PLAY

But, once again I think that it helps if we remember that this is a parable and not a morality play. As I put it last week, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. And sometimes in order to make its heavenly point, the people in the earthly story act in some very surprising ways.

For example, last week Jesus said, "Which one of you if you have a hundred sheep and one of them goes lost, does not leave the ninety nine in the open field and search for the one that is lost?"

Well, I'm not so sure any of the shepherds in the audience would have said that they would do a thing like that. Leaving the 99 unprotected in the wilderness was a crazy thing to do and not something any good shepherd would do.

But, as we talked about last week, the story isn't really about sheep and shepherds. It's about the kingdom of God. Shepherds might not risk everything for one lost sheep, but God would risk everything for those of us who are lost.

And the same is true of our story for today. It's not really about how cheaters prosper. There is no moral to this story.

It's a story with an unexpected twist that gives us insight into a radically different world, the world of God's kingdom as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a world in which money is not as important as relationships.

DISHONEST MONEY

The key phrase is the title of my sermon, "Dishonest Money". That's how the NRS translates the Greek, but that translation is a bit misleading. Literally that phrase means "unrighteous mammon" or "treacherous money".

You see we like money. Money makes the world go around. At least that's what we think.

But, the Bible has a different view. According to the Bible money can be dangerous for your spiritual health. Jesus amazed his disciples by saying that it was really hard for a rich man to make it into heaven. (And the disciples said to themselves, "Then who in the world can be saved?")

You see, they were just like us. When it comes to money, they thought that more was always better. After all, if you have money, you can solve all the problems that bedevil most of the world by just writing a check.

But, Jesus is telling us through this parable that true wealth is not to be found in money or possessions. Mammon is unrighteous. Mammon is a liar. The love of mammon is often the root of all evil.

WEALTH PERSONIFIED

The word mammon is defined in my Bible dictionary as “wealth personified”. In other words, there’s more to money than just money. In the world wealth has an influence and a life all its own. It’s as if there was some invisible hand secretly influencing all that goes on in the world.

That’s why they say if you want to find the truth, you have to follow the money. People tell us who they really are and what they really believe with their wallet and their checkbook. More than that, mammon is an interconnected system of trade that affects society as a whole. Money talks and it creates a particular kind of community.

For example, today’s parable describes a feudal system of wealth. A rich person owns all the land and hires someone to be his steward or manager over this land. There are people who live and work on the rich man’s land who are essentially sharecroppers. That is, they owe a portion of their crop to the manager who in turn passes the wealth along to the owner.

In those days (as it often is in these days) society operated by the golden rule. He who has the gold makes the rules. The rich man, the man who owned everything made the rules. And many of these rich rulers were quite demanding. Sometimes they didn’t even let the sharecroppers keep enough of their crop to make a decent living for their family.

But, the manager was lucky. He had one of the better jobs. If he was unscrupulous he could make even more money by overcharging the sharecroppers.

And that’s why, when the manager was about to lose his job, he became so desperate. He couldn’t go to work at Wal-Mart after being the CEO at General Motors. He had bills to pay and children to educate. In the real world, the rich owner would say, “Tough luck. You made your bed. Now lie in it.”

But, remember that this story is a parable. And the parable asks us to imagine a world that is different from the world that we live in.

GOD IS THE GRACIOUS LANDLORD

Suppose the fields were owned by someone who cared about people. Suppose the real owner of the world's economic system is not the rich people whom the world fears, reveres, and idolizes. Suppose the real absentee landowner is none other than God.

Well, guess what? That's the way it is.

The Native Americans used to think that the white man's idea of owning land was one of the craziest things they had ever heard of. To them it was like saying that we own the air or the sky. How can human beings own what the Creator made?

They had it right. We can't own what the Creator made. We are only stewards of this world. We are caretakers who have been entrusted with a small portion of creation for a short period of time.

WE ARE THE UNFAITHFUL STEWARD

But, we have not been good stewards. We have been wasteful stewards. We have mismanaged and squandered the resources that God has given us. We have hoarded too much for ourselves, and we too have not given enough to our Master.

In other words, if we should identify with anyone in this parable, we should identify with the unfaithful manager. We have not been good managers of the resources that God has given us. Instead of managing money, money has managed us. We only learn this in the moment of crisis ... when we lose our job or we get sick or someone we love dies.

And when that happens, like the dishonest manager, we sometimes see the futility of our ways. What are we going to do when tomorrow we might find ourselves out of a job and out on the street? How can I live with myself after squandering all the precious moments I could have had with the person I loved?

If I get sick and lose my ability to work, who is going to take care of me?
When I face death, what will I really be worth?

One thing is sure. Most of those questions won't be answered by the figure in my checkbook.

SALVATION FROM FORGIVENESS

In his desperation the unfaithful steward decided to forgive the debts of others. He didn't do it because he wanted to give all those sharecroppers a break. He did it because he hoped that one of those sharecroppers would take pity on him when he was out of his cushy job.

As I said, once the owner found out about this we would expect him to lower the boom. But, because the rich owner is God we are in for a surprise.

Like the father who welcomed the prodigal home with open arms, the rich owner commends the bad manager. What seems like bad management in the world's kingdoms is lauded as a shrewd business practice in God's kingdom.

In the world the measure of success is the bottom line. How much money can we make doing this? How many debts can we collect?

In God's kingdom the measure of success is how many people we can help and how many debts are forgiven. All of us are like the bad manager in the parable. We have squandered the resources God has given us and even when we help others it is often out of selfish motives.

But, this parable teaches us that even dishonest, broken people like us can, by the grace of God, do the right thing. In the moment of crisis we can sometimes see beyond our own self interest and find a better way.

God is happy when we share what we have and cut people a break. God is happy when we give away a portion of what rightfully belongs to Him. In fact that's the right way to use unrighteous mammon.

In this manner we can make dishonest wealth into something of eternal significance. In the end the measure of our life is not how much we keep but how much we are able to give away.

ANDREW CARNEGIE

On the history channel this past week I was watching the story of Andrew Carnegie. He was a wealthy owner of a steel plant.

But, he decided at age 60 to sell his operation to his rival, U.S. Steel. His plan was to give away all that he had by the time of his death.

But, Carnegie had so much money that he couldn't give it all away. Today the name of Carnegie is almost synonymous with philanthropy.

Someone has said that we can't out give God. If God is the owner, and we are merely the managers it is not our job to hoard everything to ourselves. It is our job to give everything away.

FAITHFUL IN A VERY LITTLE

That seems like such a daunting task. We are afraid of losing even a small part of our lives and our fortunes. Jesus understood how much he was asking, and that's why he told his disciples, "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." Luke 16:10 (NRSV)

In other words, don't try to do everything when it comes to giving. Just do the next thing. Be faithful in some small way, and it get lead to greater things. I've often talked about our two cents a meal collection. Many of us collect two cents a meal per person and turn it in the second Sunday of each month. The proceeds are used to alleviate hunger in various parts of the world.

Guess what is one of the most successful benevolence programs in the Presbyterian Church? That's right, the two cents a meal program. Almost all the churches in our Presbytery take up this offering. It seems like such a small thing, but it produces big results. In our own congregation we collect from \$1,500 to \$1,800 dollars every year.

I think that God is trying to teach us something through this offering. God is trying to teach us that we can do more than we think we can do. God is trying to teach us that we have more resources than we think we have. If we

can be faithful in this small way, perhaps we can be faithful in a greater way.

It doesn't make any difference how much we have to give. The important thing is that we are faithful with what we have. It might be a lot or it might be a little, but when we use what we have for God's kingdom, when we place an emphasis upon people and relationships instead of securing our own future, God multiplies our gift in ways that are beyond our imagination.

The real reason any of our churches struggle financially is not because they don't have enough money and resources to get the job done; it is because we do not have the faith and the vision to commit what we do have to God's kingdom.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to help us see the light.

MILLARD FULLER

In November 1965, Linda Fuller told her husband, Millard that she was leaving him. Millard was so busy making the unheard of sum of one million dollars a year at his business that he hadn't noticed that she was slipping away.

So, panicked by her wake-up call, he piled her and their children into their Lincoln Continental and set off for Florida.

On the way they met up with some friends in Georgia who had moved to Clarence Jordan's Koininia community. Millard agreed to have lunch with Jordan, wound up staying a month and eventually ended up starting something called Habitat for Humanity.

You may have heard of this unrighteous steward's crazy economic scheme ... no interest loans, houses being built for the poor by the well off.

It sounds absolutely mad doesn't it?

Well, most of us know the rest of the story, and it turns out that it wasn't so crazy after all. One man in desperation over his broken life was able to learn a valuable lesson about stewardship.

And God used him in a mighty way.

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

All of us here today are broken in one way or another. We are all dishonest stewards who are afraid of what the future might bring. Some of us have debts that we can't pay. Some of us have broken relationships that seem beyond repair. Some of us feel like our life is out of control.

But, we have the assurance that the One who owns everything and the One who made everything loves us and cares for us. We don't have to do everything; we just have to do the next thing.

Think of some way that you can use the resources that have been entrusted to you so that life can be a little better for a brother or sister in need. It will be the first step in a long journey of hope and faith.

I often joke that when Presbyterians talk about sin in the Lord's Prayer we use a financial image. We say "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

But, there's something right about that. When Jesus died on the cross the Bible tells us that in one Divine stroke a world of debts were forgiven.

If we believe that, if we believe that the owner of this world is a loving forgiving God, then we need to be about bringing debt reduction, we need to be about bringing forgiveness to a broken and sinful world.

God help us do just that.

Amen.