

“The Truth About Money”
Luke 16:1-13
Sunday, September 18, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

There’s an old story that many of you may know about a young man in Montana who bought a horse from a farmer for \$100. The farmer agreed to deliver the horse the next day. However when the next day arrived, the farmer reneged on his promise.

“I’m afraid the horse has died,” he explained.

The young man said, “Well, then give me my money back.”

The farmer said, “Can’t do that. I spent it already.”

The young man thought for a moment and said, “Ok, then, just bring me the dead horse.”

The farmer asked, “What you going to do with a dead horse?”

The young man said, “I’m going to raffle it off.”

The farmer said, “You can’t raffle off a dead horse!”

The young man said, “Sure I can. Watch me. I just won’t tell anybody he’s dead.”

A month later, the farmer met up with the young man and asked, “What happened with that dead horse?” The young man said, “I raffled him off. I sold 500 tickets at two dollars apiece and made a profit of \$998 . . .”

The farmer said, “Didn’t anyone complain?”

The young man said, “Just the guy who won. So I gave him his two dollars back.”

Jesus tells a complicated story that has intrigued and aggravated many a scholar. Often entitled “The Dishonest Manager,” the parable has many and varied interpretations.

I. Practical Applications.

The manager is to be fired because of hearsay – we don't know if the manager is actually guilty of any wrongdoing. The story only says that he is accused and that the master plans to take his position away from him.

The manager decides to reduce the amounts owed by debtors. He thus sets up a requirement that the debtors assist him in the future. They owe him. This would not be a choice in those days. The rules of reciprocal hospitality are binding. He is guaranteeing his own future by indebting the debtors to himself.

The manager is saving his own skin by reducing the debts of the others.

There's a practicality that Jesus wants his disciples to pay attention to. The "children of light" can learn something from "the children of this age," he seems to be saying (v. 8). The manager in the story may be dishonest; or he may be caught in a social system of dishonesty and doing his best to survive. Whatever the case may be, he uses his money to make friends, while he has the money to do so.

Audre Lorde wrote a famous essay called, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." This would make a good title for Jesus' parable.

The manager in Jesus' story dismantles an unethical debt structure. He accomplishes this by engaging in unethical practices himself: he reduces the debts in a manner his master would never consider.

As Jesus tells it in his story, "the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly" (v. 8). Notice that the manager is not commended for his dishonesty. He is commended for his shrewdness. Children of light, pay attention. Take note. You may learn something from the children of this age about how to get by in the world.

But wait a minute here. The manager has instructed the master's debtors to change their bills...to pay less than what they owe! What business owner would commend an employee for behaving like that? Let's say you're a cashier at Ralph's. Let's say you decide to charge everyone half price for their groceries. Is Ralph's going to say, "Well done! You're not fired anymore; you're promoted to assistant manager!?" No way.

Can you picture Jesus and his disciples, sitting around the table, debating the ins and outs of this story with Pharisees and scribes and tax collectors and poor people?

One scholar suggests that, "the manager is [being] praised for having the qualities of a manager! It is this quality of responsiveness rather than the possible morality of the action that is the object of praise." (Luke Timothy Johnson). In other words, the manager is commended for grasping the circumstances and taking action – making the best of a bad situation.

In Deut. 23:19-20 it says: "You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess."

Maybe the manager isn't dishonest at all. Maybe he has simply decided, all of a sudden, to keep the letter of the Deuteronomic law. Maybe he has decided to remove the interest from what the debtors owe. Or: Maybe he is denying himself his own profit; he's making friends he will need in the near future, once he has lost his job.

I like one pastor's comments about how difficult it can be to distinguish good from evil:

"When I was a youth," this pastor writes, "I went to the movies, and I always came away from the theater knowing who were the good guys and who were the bad guys. The good guys

usually wore fine clothing, rode white horses, used better English, had wholesome faces, and were nicer to their animals. Their saddles were often studded with jeweled stones. Many signs were given to help me understand who was good and who was bad.

“Now as an adult, things are not nearly as clear and simplistic. I went to see a movie recently, and it was so complicated that it was several hours before I realized who was good and who was bad. And still I have some doubts about my conclusions.

“In this parable, Jesus is telling us that evil is very cunning and shrewd. It is camouflaged so perfectly that we sometimes have difficulty recognizing it. It's not just a matter of knowing who are the good guys and the bad guys on the movie screen, but it is also difficult to differentiate between good and evil in our own lives. Good and evil live side by side and sometimes appear to be identical twins.” (Thomas C. Short)

Who are the bad guys in Jesus' story? Is it the master, who is a rich landlord oppressing the small farmers by demanding high rents? Is it the Roman government, who adds its exorbitant taxes to the peasants' woes?

Is it the tax collector, a Jew who collaborates with the government against his own people? Is it the Pharisees or the scribes, who add religious demands to the already impoverished people? Maybe the bad guy is the manager who's about to be fired. Or maybe not. There seems to be plenty of blame to go around.

Maybe Jesus isn't giving direct answers to the Pharisees, the disciples, and the crowd. Maybe his goal is to shock and challenge their categories of good and evil. If the “dishonest” manager is the hero in the story, does the rich master become the villain? Jesus seems to leave all options open in his usual turning-the-world-upside-down way.

II. Kingdom Applications.

The very rich and the very poor are in Jesus' audience. The social reality is that of rich landlords and the Roman government taking the small farmers' crops, leaving hard working folks to barely scrape by.

What is the property that is being squandered by the manager in verse 1? Like all of Jesus' stories, this story is, on a deeper level, about the kingdom of God. We can be certain that the "property" represents all that God has entrusted to the man. Spiritual blessings as well as practical possessions. All that the man has is intended to be used for God's purposes. All of God's good creation is intended to be managed with the utmost of care.

But the man has been doing whatever he wants with what God has given him. The man has even begun to treat the possessions as his own, using them for his own profit.

If we choose to identify the man as a scribe or a Pharisee, we begin to understand that Jesus is once again reminding the religious authorities that they need to forgive the debts of others if they want God to forgive them their own sinful ways.

If we view the story as a metaphor for the kingdom of God, the master represents God. In kingdom economy, the price has been paid and our debts are forgiven. The Master commends us whenever we forgive the debts of others. This is a comfort. To identify ourselves with the dishonest manager is a relief. We don't have to be perfect. We don't even have to be particularly moral. God sees the best in us, as we scrape and scramble for survival in an ethically complex world. God graciously chooses to forgive us. He lovingly chooses to provide a place for us among his people – both in this life and in the next.

God in Christ Jesus doesn't reduce the amount of our debts – he forgives our debts entirely. God puts in place a kingdom where the poor are not punished for trying to survive.

God knows the system is stacked against them. God puts in place a kingdom where shrewdness is recognized and commended. Jesus does not call his disciples to a naïve, “it’s good to be good and nice to be nice” religion. Jesus calls his disciples to a real life struggle between good and evil, in which we have to make daily choices that are hard – even gut-wrenching. Jesus doesn’t give us pat answers. He offers relationship. With him. With a new family of people who follow his way. Together we work out the complicated, nitty-gritty question of: What is God calling us to do in this specific situation? Today?

This scholar says it well:

“The grace of God is like the man who went into the clothing store to buy a suit and was shown a blue one. ‘No,’ the customer said, ‘That won’t do. I want a green suit.’ So the clerk called out to his partner, ‘Turn on the green light, Joe, the man wants a green suit!’ It is not that things are changed. But we see them differently. In Christ we are given spectacles which give us a kingdom perspective. We see ourselves in a heavenly light; through God’s eyes. We see how things really are. We need no longer suffer from the stigma that ‘sinner’ -- forgiven or otherwise -- denotes. We can see ourselves as ‘heirs’ with Christ of the Divine inheritance. The world is not changed, but we see it and ourselves in a new light; a kingdom light.” (Robert McClelland).

If we are seeing the world with a kingdom light: What is dishonest wealth? What are true riches?

What does it mean to be “faithful with dishonest wealth?” as Jesus teaches in verse 11. We must keep in mind that Jesus comes to bring good news to the poor, the outcast, the rejected and the forgotten. Jesus, in this story, is not telling his disciples to be faithful to the wealthy. He is not instructing his followers to give allegiance to the rich and powerful of this world.

Jesus is telling his people to use their resources “faithfully.” What does it mean to be faithful in Jesus’ economy? It means to use what we have from God to help the least among us. It means to use our money and our possessions to serve the poor, the outcast, the rejected and the forgotten.

Dishonest wealth is wealth as defined by the world. True riches are the riches we find in loving God and God’s kingdom.

Closing.

“You cannot serve God and wealth,” says Jesus, in v. 13.

Jesus makes “the truth about money” plain. You cannot love God and money. You have to make a choice.

Mark Trotter, a well-known United Methodist pastor, tells a story about “a minister in Columbus, Ohio. The minister has a friend who works downtown. The friend is something of an enigma to the minister, because he grows hot and cold about the Church and religion. But they are good friends. They have a good relationship. They get together often, have lunch together.

“On this occasion he went to his office to meet him for lunch. He sat down to talk before they went out. The man looked out his office window, and said, ‘Barry, I think I’ve got it figured out now. The big guy is going to ask two questions when we get up to the gate. I’m serious now. I’m not kidding. I really mean this. The first question will be, ‘What did you do with what I gave you?’ Then he is going to ask, ‘Who did you do it for?’”

The dishonest manager helps others for his own gain.

Jesus calls us to help others in gratitude for what he has done for us. Jesus calls us to love others because God first loved us. May it be that way for you. Amen.