

**“This Parable Does Not Seem
Quite Right”
September 22, 2019
Hamilton Presbyterian Church**

The Prayer for Understanding:

Steadfast Lover of us all,
we come as persons seeking to:
live more genuinely,
learn more expansively,
love more deeply.
We want to base our lives on the love of Christ, so that from day to day
we may be passionate and patient,
faithful and forgiving.
Open us to Your message for today. Amen.

The Witness of the Scripture:

The Gospel: Luke 16:1-8

The Sermon:

I am a wait-in-line kind of guy. For example, at the cleaners or the grocery store, or boarding a plane, I look for the line, take my place and dutifully work my way up. It's just what I do.

And in the same way, I am a right-is-right kind of guy. So when something is wrong or people do not receive the justice that is theirs, or they experience roughshod treatment, I get terribly unsettled when things are not fair.

OK, sometimes I get overexcited, and I joust at windmills like Don Quixote; but then, I may come to my senses and wonder: “Can we find a road through this situation?” That's the way our world is: sometimes folks do not receive treatment that is just and fair, and we need to respond.

So for me, it's important to do the right thing and that's exactly why today's parable gripes me: “This Parable Does Not Seem Quite Right.”

What is a parable? “A parable is a grassroots lesson connecting the ordinary of life with the extraordinary nature of God.”¹

Some weeks back, consulting the lectionary for this 15th Sunday after Pentecost, I read today's Gospel lesson and thought, "Oh my, what am I to do?" One of the perverse glories of the lectionary is to deal with the cards you are dealt. Who knows, new insights may emerge.

So brace yourselves for today's passage:

Luke 16:1-8

II.

Luke is the most literary writer in the New Testament and this story takes some masterful twists and turns.

A wealthy landowner summons his business manager and tells him: "Expect to be fired for being careless with my estate, wasteful; maybe even, you've been cheating me."

Now this manager doesn't just mope around like a victim. Instead, he begins to devise a salvage plan for when he's actually fired. "Uh-oh," he reasons, "this stinks. I can't afford to lose my job. I'm in no mood for manual labor and begging is a lousy alternative. I'd better find Plan B."

The plot thickens! This guy develops (shall we say), "shady arrangements" with those in debt to the landowner. To save himself, he begins slashing their debts.

But of course, this comes to light. How could it not? His boss discovers his scheming manager – behind his back – reduced the bills of his debtors.

Enter the unexpected twist! Of all things, his boss appears delighted. Here is Eugene Peterson's translation in The Message:

"The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits."

And Jesus adds a point to this, (still in Peterson's translation):

"I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you will live, really live, and not in some complacent way"

The people of this world look out for themselves better than those who belong to the light.

Helen Debevoise writes:

“Why would Jesus make an example for godly living so unsavory? The parable presents as a model for our faith someone whose life is the complete opposite of everything Christ ever taught. Jesus weaves a story in which the main character is a shyster – a conniving, self-centered manager of someone else’s treasure. He is out for personal gain, to save his own skin. We listeners lean forward to the end because we want to see this scoundrel gets what is coming to him, and when the master finally speaks, we’re shocked.

“... instead of being defeated, this scoundrel triumphs. His plan succeeds. The reader sighs in disbelief because the conniving manager does not get his due.”²

III.

Well, there you are. Now let’s unpack this scripture to discern what it might be saying to us today.

I suspect this story is repeated in real life a million times over. Perhaps we can agree there is no shortage of unscrupulous behavior today. How many times in your life have you run across a person – man or woman – for whom personal gain is everything and they are content to run roughshod over whatever is in their way.

This feels strangely out of place in the world of scripture. Aren't we supposed to be kind, loving, fair, generous and slow to anger?

Yet this common in our world, where folks operate as though the ends justify the means. Business is done, and if we're honest, business often succeeds, because people act shrewdly – whether honestly or not.³

When I reflect on this parable, the moment that most resonates with me is when Jesus says the dishonest manager was commended for acting shrewdly. Then, I think, Jesus sounds almost wistful: “The people of this world look out for themselves better than the people who belong to the light.” He is saying: “Can you who do good at least be as shrewd, as those who do bad?” The parable warns that those who walk in the light of the Lord have lost the eternal perspective in our relationship to God.

Somewhere along the way the vision for God’s call became cloudy and muddled. Somewhere along the way we stopped hearing God’s voice and joined the crazy survivor-takes-all mentality. Somewhere along the way the challenges seemed so much bigger than the answers that we walked away. Along the way we huddle in to save whatever is left and forgot about living for something greater.

IV.

As I worked on this sermon, I wondered if I had it all wrong. Perhaps this is actually a parable of unmerited grace in which God is calling us to faithfulness.

Our manager functions as a sort of anti-hero. It's easy to grow complacent about responsibilities God gives us, the mission we called to engaged in, to reach out and tell the story, the justice that should roll down like a mighty river and the righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This parable is a call to reclaim who we are, to renew our vision for God's kingdom among us and beyond us. Jesus is saying: We can be better.

But I wonder if there is not a second message. For sure, the shrewd manager's motives are mixed. He is a sneaky guy. Well we have mixed motives as well. Each Sunday, our Prayer of Confession points to that.

So here's the second twist: this manager, for all his faults, did receive grace. Not because he is a good guy to be sure, but it does seem a second chance. You and I are also recipients of grace. So maybe this is about unmerited grace, a story of God who loves us into fellowship with him. This is what life is within the fellowship of the church. It is God's welcome we proclaim: we meet each other in this place because this place welcomes all.

I am a fan of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was martyred by the Nazis in 1945. For me, he wraps it up well:

“It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren: the visible fellowship is a blessing.

“The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged.

“And that clarifies the goal of all Christian Community: we meet each other as bringers of the message of salvation.”⁴

We, all of us, together are “bringers of the message of salvation.” I believe Jesus is saying to us: “Hop to it!”

1. Feasting on the Word, year C, Vol 4, page 92.
2. Feasting on the Word, year C, Vol.4, page 92.
3. Thoughts from “Shrewd Faith” a sermon by Christopher Girata.
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

