

Spring Lake Presbyterian Church

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Luke 16:1-13

1 Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. 2 So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' 3 "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' 4 "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 " 'Eight hundred gallons^[a] of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' 7 "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' " 'A thousand bushels^[b] of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' 8 "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. 9 I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. 10 "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? 12 And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? 13 "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

Faithfulness

Once upon a time in a land far away there was a beautiful, independent, self-assured princess. One afternoon, she was by herself sitting by a pond.

Suddenly a frog hopped out of the water, landed in her lap, and began to talk to her. The frog said, "Elegant lady, I was once a handsome prince until a witch cast a spell on me. However, one kiss from you and I will turn back into the dashing young prince that I am. Then, my darling, we can marry and set up housekeeping in your mother's palace, and you can prepare all my meals, clean my clothes, bear my children, and forever feel grateful, privileged and happy doing so!"

That night, as the young princess enjoyed a delicious dinner of sauteed frog legs, she chuckled to herself and said, "I don't think so!"

We laugh at this story (or at least I hope we do!) because it simultaneously mimics familiar fairy tales while also grounding itself in modern culture. We all know that in fairy tales frogs talk to beautiful princesses, hoping the lovely girls will kiss them and break the spell that has turned them from gorgeous prince into hideous frog. We also know that in this day and age, a woman is valued for more than simply serving a man. So when we hear this story, we are able to laugh at the frog and his "old-fashioned" ways

while also taking pride in the princess for standing up for herself when she could have been swept away by the ideal of marrying a (hopefully) handsome prince!

Had we not understood the history of this story, had we not recognized it as a fairy tale, had we not understood that princesses and frogs frequently talk to one another, we may have been a little bit confused by the story itself. And, had we lived in a culture where females serving males was not only acceptable but valued, we may have been even more confused by the princess' desire to eat her dear frog-friend.

Culture and context tell us much about stories. As we approach today's parable from the Gospel according to Luke, we are faced with a parable that, for most of us, baffles. What did Jesus mean when he said "'The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.'" Why would Jesus tell a story that seems to applaud dishonesty? Because, in all honesty, it appears that Jesus is teaching: *Focus on yourselves in order to get ahead when those in power catch you misusing their property.* That doesn't sound very Jesus-like, does it? In our own cultural context, we hear the story more like this: A woman who was pretty high up in the corporate world was believed to be embezzling funds. Her employer found out about it and began an investigation, giving her thirty days to leave the company. The woman, extremely angry at her employer (even though she truly WAS an embezzler), did not want to get a job flipping burgers nor did she wish to be living on the streets. And so, thinking only of herself, the woman approached each of her employer's clients, offering them deals to repay the company's borrowed money at twenty-five cents on the dollar. They were delighted at the prospect of paying back only ¼ of their debt to the company and immediately befriended this woman. She was satisfied because she knew she would have people who were willing to hire her and give her a decent job when her 30 days were up. Meanwhile, the employer found out about the fact that she was negotiating debt pay-offs without consulting with him. Rather than tossing her on the streets, he commended her for her shrewdness in getting people to pay off their debts (mind you, he's losing money in this process) and he takes her on, once again, as a full-time employee.

When we hear this story in our own context, we are appalled at both the employer and the employee! We are dumbfounded that the employer would be so blind to the many dishonest ways of this woman as to commend her!

Jesus told this same story in a specific context with a specific people. Many scholars who have studied this story repeatedly believe that the story Jesus told was one that was well-known in his world. He most likely changed it around a bit in a way that took his listeners by surprise. His original listeners most likely knew the characters in this story as well as we know princesses kiss frogs to turn them back into princes who marry and live happily ever after. But how do we, who are thousands of years removed from the story, hear the story and understand it for what Jesus was trying to teach? As I studied this parable, I found countless interpretations through the ages. Which one is most accurate? Most true to what Jesus was trying to teach?

We may never know – for we live in a very different social context with different stories and different lifestyles. But what we can do, is to pay attention to the context of the story within the Gospel of Luke. We can identify the fact that Luke has just told the story of

the prodigal son in the previous chapter. We can identify the fact that Jesus seems to be talking about stewardship in the following chapters. And, we can read and be shocked with the understanding which we bring from our own culture, for no matter what we read, we always bring our own experience to the table.

We also look for clues in the text itself. *“Debt was used more than once by Jesus as a metaphor for sins and forgiving debts, for forgiving sins. Jesus uses the imagery in the Lord’s Prayer. Central to the story is the fact that the rogue had no authorization to go around cancelling or cutting people’s debts. It was outrageous behavior. But Luke has been telling us that Jesus’ behavior was also outrageous. His opponents were saying he had no right to go about welcoming sinners and declaring God’s forgiveness to them. Jesus was a rogue in the system. They denied his authority to do so”* (William Loader).

Have we ever considered the fact that Jesus was a rogue in the system? That Jesus who ate with sinners and healed on the Sabbath day was actually going against the grain of his very religion? Have we ever considered that it was rogue-like for him to tell the story of the prodigal son for which father in his right mind would welcome home a son who had squandered all of his inheritance? Have we ever considered how counter-intuitive it was and is even today for us to pray with Jesus week after week “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?” (are we literally forgiving our debtors?)

The dishonest manager can be interpreted as Jesus himself, going against the grain of society, against the authority of his Jewish religion, and forgiving debts that were not believed to be his to forgive. Jesus was forgiving sins that many believed were not his to forgive. He was a rebel! He was a heretic! He was acting with the authority of the master . . . he was acting with the authority of God!

And yet, herein, lies the basis of our own Christian religion. The parable is not teaching us to be dishonest, but rather *shrewd* (in a positive sense.) The parable was claiming that Jesus was COMMENDED for forgiving sins. He was COMMENDED for eating with sinners and for telling stories where the father receives the squandering and sinful son back into his home. In verse 8 we read, *8“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.* Jesus is teaching that frequently we who call ourselves “religious” don’t have a clue how to relate to people in the real world. We have no idea how to forgive. We have no idea how to embrace. All we see is that “they” are sinful and we want nothing to do with them. We don’t want to identify with those people who have squandered all of their inheritance. We would rather identify with those who have, throughout their lives, saved their inheritance and frugally spent what had been given to them. We don’t even want to TALK to those who are indebted to society.

But when we take this approach, are we not just as heretical as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day who forbid him to talk to the woman at the well because she was of a different race? Who forbid him to eat with sinners? Jesus concludes his parable in Luke with the familiar words, *13“No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one*

and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." Jesus asks us to consider where our money came from in the first place. It is not ours to hold back.

As I was trying to understand the meaning of this text, I happened upon the writings of Justin Martyr and Iranaeus from around the year 180 c.e. (a.d.) They wrote about the Egyptians who were what they were because of the keen knowledge of Joseph, an Israelite, yet the Egyptians continued to hold Israel in slavery until the days of Moses. They wrote about their own time, ruled by the Romans, and how they frequently forgot that they were able to travel on roads, be entertained, etc. because of the rule of the Romans. As I reflect on their writings, I also consider the many who have allowed us to have what we have. We hoard our money selfishly because we feel it is owed us – yet we have what we have because someone saw fit to hire us or to hire our spouse; we have what we have because someone (in addition to us) contributed to social security; we have what we have because once upon a time one of our impoverished ancestors decided to take a chance and come to this country. We have what we have because of others, yet we are selfish in such a way that denies others the right to try to get back on their feet? In Jesus' story today, we are the *listeners*, denying the dishonest employee any rights when, in fact, they were never ours to give. And isn't that the irony of the whole story? Jesus is being denied the authority to eat with sinners and forgive sins – he is even being a so-called heretic -- while we are claiming the authority to decide how this dishonest employee should spend his master's money when it isn't ours anyway. We, the listeners, are the true heretics.

I don't know about you, but I am humbled by this parable. I am struck by my own selfishness and God's own willingness to forgive my debts. I am struck by my own love of money even as I declare that I am faithful to God alone.

The title of today's sermon is simply "Faithfulness." Verse 10-12 (NRSV) states "*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. 11If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?*" To what or to whom are we faithful? If we have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth – that is, the wealth of this world – the wealth handed down to us from inheritances, social security, and even our own pensions and our worldly work, the wealth that does not belong to us but to God who has allowed us to receive it . . . If we have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, then why should God trust us with eternal wealth? If we have not been faithful to that which belongs to God, why should God eternally give us what is ours? If we have not forgiven the debts of others, why should God forgive us? If we have not welcomed the stranger into our lives, why should God welcome us? If we have not opened the doors of our church to the entire world, why should God open the doors of heaven to us?

Faithfulness. It seems this story Jesus told from his own context might just continue to speak to us today. And so I offer these words of hope, these words of life: We who are untrustworthy have been entrusted with much. We are blessed beyond blessings. We are loved more than a parent loves a child because God is not constrained by religious rules . . . because Jesus was willing to show us how to love heretically and counter-

culturally. Even when we are not faithful, God is faithful. Hear and believe the good news of the gospel. Amen.