

18 September 2016
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jason Haddox

It's Dishonest Manager Sunday, y'all! Yay.

This is, quite possibly, THE MOST CONVOLUTED parable in Jesus' library. All the commentators are in a lather; even my beloved go-to, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, University Professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, general editor of The Jewish Annotated New Testament, and writer of the commentary on Luke's Gospel therein, opts to omit this story from her collection Short Stories By Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of A Controversial Rabbi (Harper-Collins, 2014)

It's not that the story is particularly hard to understand; it's that the story totally messes with our notions about God and morality and left-brain orderly logic regarding how life is supposed to work. Which probably means it's a truly good parable—it is not a morality tale or fable, or an “inspirational thought” to comfort us in our already-established assumptions and expectations.

We've just heard “the three tales of Prodigality” in chapter fifteen: the stories of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Child (or Prodigal Son, which I call “the Prodigal Daddy.”) All of those stories touched on the loss of something valuable—a sheep, a silver coin, a younger son who wanders away to a far-off country and “squanders his property in dissolute living.”

This morning we overhear Jesus talking to the disciples, further explaining to them (or confusing and bewildering them) about what he was trying to get across in the earlier stories. It's as if Jesus turns to his inner circle to say “And in case you still didn't get the point of all that, here's another story to mess with your head...”

In several places in the parable we hear the word “wealth.” Older translations of the Bible might have used a word that was transliterated from Aramaic, “mammon”. “Mammon” can mean money in particular, or more generally material possessions. Stuff, in a word. By the end of the gospel reading this morning, Mammon/Wealth takes on a personal, even diabolical quality, that is directly and blatantly opposed to the purpose and intention of God.

Wealth/money/ “stuff” is a big deal in the gospel of Luke. The accusation leveled at the Pharisees, that they were “lovers of money”, was a common derogatory technique in Greco-Roman culture. We use it too. If you think someone's motives are less than honorable, you “follow the money.” For the writer of Luke's gospel, being too caught up in the acquisition of “stuff” was a great sin. Such behavior and such a way of life

actually separates people from the love and grace of God, and reinforces that deceptive illusion of “having control over the situation.”

But then God comes to visit. And what happens when God comes to visit is that everything gets turned upside down and inside out. This is in the story from the beginning, all the way back in chapter 1. After the Angel Gabriel shows up in Mary’s front yard on a Monday morning while she’s feeding the chickens, just to tell her: “You have been chosen by God to have YOUR world turned upside down and inside out!”; after she makes the long journey to the hill country to Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Zechariah’s home and Elizabeth bellows in welcome across the room, Mary stands in the doorway, still dusty from the road, and she begins to sing. And what does she sing?

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior...He has put down the mighty from their seat; he has exalted the humble and meek; he has filled the hungry with good things; he has sent the rich away empty-handed...”

When God shows up, everything gets turned over.

So Jesus tells us, “There was once a rich man who had a manager.” This manager, or steward, is probably a slave of the household, who is in charge of the household accounts. The rich man (later called “the master”) does not ask for an explanation exactly, but tells him to turn in the account books, his services in that capacity are no longer required. We don’t know exactly HOW he was “squandering” the rich man’s property, but it isn’t important. What is important is that we notice the word “squandered.” We’ve just heard another story—the Lost Son/Prodigal Daddy—about someone who “squanders” the resources at his disposal, and then has the wealth of the household “squandered” upon him at his homecoming, in spite of older brother’s disgust with the matter. So already we’re on alert that this may not turn out all neat and tidy with a bow on top.

The manager takes the opportunity to slash the quantities of “stuff” owed to the master. In a scene worthy of any Marx Brothers film, he panics. “What shall I do? I can’t work, I won’t ask for help...Aha, I know! You, how much do you owe? A hundred? Make it fifty! You, you owe fifty? Make it twenty-five. Such a deal!”

And then “the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.” Here’s where it gets really interesting. “The master”=the same word we translate as “lord.” Could be “master, your honor, good sir”. Could be “Lord-with-a-capital-L.” In which case the sentence reads “And The Lord (that is, Jesus) commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly...”

This is where we get really anxious, because surely Jesus isn't commending shady financing and cooking the books?

This is the same Jesus who repeatedly gets criticized for hanging out with the cheaters and the prostitutes and the riff-raff. His greatest opponents are the respectable and the devout and the scrupulous.

But Jesus is also utterly sure in who he is, and who has sent him. The Lord, the master, the prodigal Abba of whom Jesus speaks so often, isn't going to run out of anything! No matter how prodigal someone may be, God's got more where that came from.

Once upon a time, at the altar, as the gifts of bread and wine and money were received and placed there, the priest would say or sing: "All things come of thee, O Lord; and of thine own have we given thee." It's all God's anyway. And God—at least the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—is not interested in scorekeeping or tit-for-tat bargaining, or counting up how many merit badges anyone has earned. In fact, God seems to be most interested in the people who can't get it together no matter what—because, perhaps, they know that they aren't succeeding by their own merit by any means anyway. They can receive because their hands are empty. And having received, they can share what has been given them.

It's as if Jesus is asking his closest friends: Didn't you hear the last three stories I told? You keep trying to make it about some kind of cosmic achievement competition, and that's not the point at all!

The manager has nothing of his own. All that he has, ultimately belongs to the Master, the Lord. "O Kyrios". The shrewdness he demonstrates (also translatable as "prudence") is commended because, in the end, it is a good thing for both the manager and those over whom he has authority. Confronted with a crisis, (the visitation of his Lord!) he considers the options and acts in a way that benefits a considerable number of those very ones whom Jesus calls to himself—the indebted, the underdogs, the vulnerable ones.

Jesus is not directing his followers to go to work on Monday morning and start embezzling from the company coffers. On the other hand, in a world which builds profit margins for the CEOs and stockholders by paying employees so little that they have to depend on public assistance while working two or three part-time jobs...maybe there are some things that need to be turned upside down and inside out.

At the end of it all, God is God and the stuff—the wealth, the possessions, the false gods of security by acquisition—is not, are not. These false gods fall to dust before the God whom we follow as friends and companions of Jesus.

So then: what do we do? How do we choose, day by day, sometimes minute by minute, to serve the living God, the one who liberates slaves from their bondage in Egypt and calls for justice and mercy toward the oppressed and marginalized? AND...and...who invites the rich and the powerful, the lovers of money and those who live comfortably with the illusion of self-sufficiency, to come and be set free from their bondage as well?

This is the Good News, the gospel, for all who seek to follow the Way of Jesus. It may look like shady business, or chaos, or even Death. It is the way to new life, the life of the dominion of God. The way up is the way down. The way down is the way up. Come and see.