

The Faithful Manager

Proper 20, Year C - Luke 16:1-13

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 22, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Here we go again. I have a decided dislike for the parable Jesus tells in this morning's Gospel lesson, usually referred to in books and such as the "Parable of the Dishonest Manager." My basic problem is that I have never been able to figure out why this manager fellow is worthy of emulation. I have never been able to figure out why Jesus follows the story up by telling his listeners, "You should all be as shrewd as this manager." I mean, read from a modern perspective, this whole story, and *especially* Jesus' response to it, just doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

It seems there was this rich man who had hired someone to manage his money for him. Lending things out, buying, selling, that sort of thing. At some point, someone accuses the manager of wasting his boss' resources, and the boss calls the manager in to account for himself. "I've heard some disturbing news about your management practices and I'm really disappointed." he says. "I want to see your books tomorrow and I want you out of here by the end of the week." The manager is in big trouble. He says to himself, "What am I going to do?" "Maybe if I do something for the boss's customers, one of them will hire me when I'm out on the streets." So he calls in the customers one at a time and he says, "How much do you owe the boss?" One of them responds, "I owe a hundred jugs of olive oil." To his utter astonishment, the manager says, "Fine. Make your note out for fifty." He did the same thing with the other customers. When he had finished this little task, the story concludes, the boss comes back and *congratulates* the manager on being so shrewd!

Given the way things work nowadays, if you were this guy's boss, what would *you* think about this whole set up? I'm about to fire this guy and he gives my money away to buddy up to my clients. I've always thought that instead of commending this guy, I'd more likely come in and smack him up the side of his head. Like I said, the story has just never made much sense to me. But here's this screwy story this morning, and here I am standing up here behind the fancy desk, in a fancy white man-dress, with all y'all looking up here, thinking, "Okay, now what?" I couldn't very well ignore it, so I drove on in.

And I am delighted to report that, after digging through every commentary I could lay my hands on, I think that I might finally have a handle on this story. Now, I suppose I *could* spend the next ten or fifteen or twenty minutes lecturing on the intricacies of first century Jewish economic practices – you know I *could*. But let it suffice to say that the reason the boss isn't absolutely, positively, and even *fatally* furious with the manager for "giving away the store," is that what he was actually giving away was all the ridiculously excessive, *dishonest* commissions that he had tacked on in the first place.

All these years, I had thought that this parable was about stealing from the boss. All these years, I had thought that what the Dishonest Manager was doing, was being crafty and sly and shrewd enough to use worldly things to his advantage. Now that I've gotten over being offended and mad and confused that Jesus would actually commending such behavior, it seems that the reason that the hero of our story is so often called the Dishonest Manager isn't that he was stealing from his boss at the *end* of the story, but that up *until* that time, he had been lining his pockets by stealing from everybody *else*. This parable, it seems, is not a story about thievery and greed, but a story about accountability and responsibility. It's a story about mercy and justice. It's a story about faithfulness and stewardship. By giving back his ill-gotten gains, our *Newly-Honest* Manager displays a change of attitude toward the property he had controlled, the resources that had been made available for his use, the gifts that had been entrusted to his care and keeping. In

the end, he has a change of mind that not only pleases the customers, but finally impresses his boss as well. What Jesus commends, what finally makes an honest man out of our unlikely hero, is a change of heart to finally understand *whose* wealth he was handling in the first place.

Sitting here this morning, nearly every one of us is blessed with time and talents and treasures beyond the greatest *imaginings* of most of the world, blessings that are only dreams for many in our *own* land of plenty, gifts that are just out of reach to far too many, right here in our own community. And still we spend most of our lives trading time for treasure, laying up stack upon stack, chasing just the next level of security, the next raise, the next bonus, the next, more comfortable tax bracket. And that's a problem, Jesus says, because you really, "*cannot serve God and wealth.*"

But there's a still bigger problem, isn't there? You see, it really doesn't matter whether we have a little or a lot, but being as blessed as we *are*, it is awfully tempting to view those blessings as ours by right. We've *earned* everything we have. I'm entitled to do what I want, with what's *mine*. Pretty soon, we take the next logical step, and begin to think that the only thing that really counts is what *we* want. We begin to think that the only needs and desires that must be met, are *ours*. Like the Dishonest Manager we begin to think that we may use the Boss's gifts however best suits *us*.

But the Gospel this morning challenges us to look at things differently. The Gospel this morning challenges us to see that the gifts that we have been given – the time and the talent, the intelligence and the strength, the health and the wealth – are *not* ours outright. They are not something we earned for ourselves. They are not some kind of entitlement. The Gospel this morning challenges us to see the responsibility and the accountability and the *stewardship* that is ours, precisely *because* we have been given so much. The Gospel this morning challenges us to realize in whose name we hold *every* gift, and for whose benefit those gifts should be employed. The Gospel this morning challenges us to understand that our gifts are the gracious bounty of our creator, redeemer and sustainer, given to us to use according to *God's* own purpose.

And at the end of the story, maybe *that* kind of understanding will finally make an honest manager, out of us. Because, as Jesus says somewhere else, where you put your treasure, that's where he's going to find your heart.