

## The Worst Parable, Like, Ever

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Luke 16:1-13

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The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ  
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### I.

You may have noticed a new heading at the top of the order of worship.

It reads: Liturgy of the Word.

No one has asked me about it yet.

Perhaps you hadn't noticed or you already know what it means. Perhaps you don't care.

Maybe it just sounds like churchspeak and you figure you'll just let the new pastor fiddle around with all of his churchy language.

Well, since you're wondering, the word *liturgy* comes from the Greek words *leit*, meaning people, and *ourgia*, meaning "work."

So liturgy is, in churchspeak, the work people come together to do.

Liturgy of the Word is the work that we, the people, do to wrestle with, interpret, and apply the Word of God.

Not the words of God, per se, but the "big W" Word of God which is God speaking to us:

through scripture, through prayer, through music, through silence through relationships, through nature, through every way that God can find to communicate with us.

That is the work we come together to do every Sunday which feeds the work we do throughout the week wherever we find ourselves.

And boy do we have our work cut out for us this morning.

This morning, our text is the Parable of Dishonest Manager, which I call, half-affectionately, half-disdainfully, the worst parable, like, ever.

I first came across this parable in a preaching course I took with the late Rev. Dr. Peter J. Gomes, Chaplain to Harvard University, Professor at Harvard Divinity School, and Pastor of Memorial Church in Harvard Yard.

The course was "Preaching the Parables."

There were only eight of us and the flow of the course went like this:

Dr. Gomes would assign each of us a parable.

We would write a research paper on it.

We would preach on it, without notes, in the exaggerated pulpit of Memorial Church.

Finally, the professor and our fellow students would scrutinize our sermons for our edification as preachers.

One day, Rev. Gomes, who was a self-described Afro-Saxon, told us, "Listen carefully to your peers. This may be the last time anyone is completely honest with you about your preaching, save your spouse."

For my part, that has proved to be true. Thank you to my beloved Brooke.

Though I was already in seminary, when Dr. Gomes assigned me Jesus' Parable of the Dishonest Manager, it was the first time I had ever heard it.

And since then, I often wish I could un-hear it.

The first time I read it through, I thought I had misread it. Alas, I had not.

Here is the worst part, in Jesus' own words: "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

That sounds more like something that would be uttered by one of our major presidential candidates, if not both of them.

What possible "Good News" might we wrestle out of this text, given that it is both confusing and emulates someone of questionable moral behavior?

Of course, we could simply dismiss it out of hand.

We *could*, but one reason I like to preach from the lectionary, the ecumenical cycle of prescribed weekly readings, is that it forces us to consider texts we would otherwise dismiss.

And growth, for individuals and for communities such as our own church, comes not from facing that which is familiar, but from facing that which is hard and then doing the necessary work.

## II.

Dr. Gomes taught us to identify what he called the "stones in the road" of a particular passage.

This parable, it seems, is a veritable cobblestone road.

A rich man catches his employee mismanaging his assets. The text calls it "squandering."

He calls him into his office and tells him he's fired. Sounds like a bad TV show.

Before you go, says the boss, give me an accounting of what is mine.

Now, I don't know a lot about 1<sup>st</sup> century business management, but typically when you fire someone you don't ask them to do anything else for you.

In this parable, the manager has a chance to go and settle the accounts of the rich man.

As he goes, he freaks out because he's going to be without a job and he doesn't want to soil his hands with manual labor or have to beg.

So, he comes up with a scheme to put him in the good graces of others.  
He goes to someone who owes the rich man 100 jugs of oil and says "make it 50."  
To someone who owes 100 containers of wheat, "make it 80."  
There's certainly good news in this parable for the manager, who will have friends in the days ahead, and there's good news for those whose debts were decreased, but why would the rich man then commend the manager for his shrewdness?  
And what does this have to do with the kingdom of God?  
Luke adds to the end of this story several layers of sayings by Jesus that try to rescue the parable for future interpreters.  
I'm not so sure they don't go and make things more confusing.

### III.

Have you ever gone to the Bible in search of inspiration and gotten disappointed?  
I realized long ago that the Bible is not a compendium of inspirational sayings.  
Instead, it is a rocky road of stories meant to be as challenging as real life.  
And yet, to read the Gospel with faith is to trust that the challenge is worth it, that God's blessing is waiting to be found in stories as real as life itself.

In the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, we are invited into a world that is strangely familiar.

We are invited into the world of business, of power structures, of disparate wealth.  
We are invited into a world of money and property and resources.

It is a world of anxiety.

The rich man is anxious about how his property is being managed.  
The manager is anxious about losing his status and having to work with his hands.  
Debtors are anxious about what they owe and how they are going to repay it.

It is a world in which people do what they do in order to look after their own interests.

The rich man has to make prudent staffing decisions to safeguard his investments.  
The manager has to plan for his future using the influence he still possesses.  
The debtors have to honor their debts and will gladly reduce them if told to do so.

Jesus tells a parable about this world, a world that his early listeners would have understood, and we, his late listeners, understand as well.  
In using these characters and this situation, Jesus is saying to all of us, the kingdom of God is not separate from the anxieties of everyday life.  
God's realm is not unconcerned with the bargains you have to make with yourself and others.

God's dominion is not a vague, otherworldly realm that we can either escape to or wait to come down from the sky one day.

It is in the next chapter of Luke, after all, that Jesus says, "'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

In other words, the message of the Parable of the Dishonest Manager just might be that the kingdom of God is right here in the midst of your life.

Right here in your decisions for daily survival. Right here in the midst of your money. Here in the midst of your bills.

Here in the midst of your strained relationships with subordinates and superiors.

In the midst of your investments.

In the midst of your retirement planning.

In the midst of your debts.

In the midst of your oil and your wheat.

In the midst of your mortgage or rent payment, if you're fortunate enough to have one.

In the midst of the car in which you sleep.

In the midst of your allowance which never seems to stretch far enough.

In the midst of spreadsheets and bank statements and EFT's, of SDI checks and IRA withdrawals.

In the midst of your charitable giving, including your pledge to the church, which you could spend on other things, but you don't.

The kingdom of God, walking the halls of Trump Tower and distributing funds through the Clinton foundation.

The kingdom of God in the midst of everything you thought remained untouched by holiness, everything you thought had nothing to do with God's loving intention for the life of the world.

Instead: nothing in this world can be separated from the kingdom of God in Christ.

Not a rich man looking out for his privileged interests.

Not an unjust manager looking to abuse his role to secure his future.

Not a farmer in debt hoping one day to be in the clear.

#### IV.

"You cannot serve God and wealth," Jesus says at the conclusion of today's parable. And yet we try, do we not?

We try to separate our wealth from our highest commitments.

We try exempting our wallets from our baptismal vows.

We try setting aside our anxieties about money for an hour in church and then go right back to them.

We convince ourselves that spirituality is one more category in our already busy lives and that we'll give some time to it when we have time to give, which isn't very often. But Jesus, in this annoying parable, reminds us that you cannot serve God and wealth because only one of these is worth of our service. The other is meant to serve humans.

I hope I don't have to tell you which one is which.

One more thing before I leave this terrible parable for another 3 years – that's how long the lectionary cycle is.

I want to return to the question of what possible sense it could make that the rich man, also called the master, *commended* the manager when he learned what he had done.

It could be that he was a conniving person himself and appreciated the chutzpah of his shrewd underling.

If so, then let's not equate that master character with God.

But what if Jesus intended for the master character to be a metaphor for God?

Why might the master, as God, commend the manager?

Maybe because we usually have got God all wrong.

Our culture, including the church, tends to imagine God as a rich, powerful male who is anxious about his possessions.

But what if God isn't anxious at all.

What if God wants us to steward what God has given us, but could care less about the bottom line?

What if God really wants to forgive debts, ours and everyone else's?

And what if the words, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," were actually true?

Hmm.