

“The Dishonest Manager”

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Then Jesus said to the disciples, There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer. Then the manager said to himself, What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, How much do you owe my master? He answered, A hundred jugs of olive oil. He said to him, Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, And how much do you owe? He replied, A hundred containers of wheat. He said to him, Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And 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.

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. If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Luke 16:1-13

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations
Of all of our hearts
Be acceptable in thy sight
O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.
Amen

Our passage for this morning picks up where we left off last week, with one exception. Between last week’s lesson and this lies the parable of the Prodigal Son. In any case, the context is the same: the scribes and pharisees are grumbling because Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. In response Jesus tells parables—each in their own way dealing with repentance—the power to change direction in a world gone wrong.

Indeed, last week we saw Jesus highlighting the social context of sin. It is not so much that individuals are not responsible for their own actions—(we are)—but rather that all of our individual actions are performed in the context of a social system, which limits or colors our options according to our place in that system. Indeed, last week we saw Jesus pointing out how the context of the Roman occupation, with its oppressive taxation falling disproportionately on the poor, not only revealed the privilege of the scribes and pharisees, who, with their relative wealth and social influence could well afford their “purity,” but also the narrow options left to the poor in the face of crushing poverty. In the context of an oppressive and corrupt system, Jesus says judgment is not the appropriate final response, so much as mercy. And mercy, by definition, is something that can only be given to one who doesn’t deserve it.

Which brings us to the Prodigal Son. Once the prodigal repents of his sin and returns, his father meets him with open arms. In fact, casting off all the dignity that would have been expected of such a prominent landowner, he actually comically gathers up his long robe and runs to greet his son—who, after all, couldn’t wait for him to die to receive his inheritance. Just like last week, mercy is portrayed here as almost ridiculously over the top—super-abundant, over-flowing—disconnected from even the pretense of worthiness.

In our parable for today, once the rich landowner discovers the scheme of his steward, rather than fire him, he commends him for the shrewdness of his instinct for self-preservation. Just as the mercy of the father is played up in the Prodigal Son, seeming to be intended to elicit delighted laughter from the parable’s earthy audience—the mercy of the rich landowner is similarly funny, but perhaps for a different reason—this time because the steward has managed to put the rich landowner in such a position that he can’t punish the steward without revealing his own hypocrisy and culpability before the law.

Consider: What the original audience of Jesus’ parable would have known that we perhaps have forgotten, is that usury, defined in Hebrew scripture as the charging of interest on a loan, is against God’s law—it is a sin. And yet, we read in the Mishnah that in this time it was common for rich landowners to do just that. They just hid the interest in the contracts by wrapping it up in the principal. It was win/win for the rich. If the poor farmers could pay, it enriched the loan-sharking lenders, if they could not, they could foreclose on the poor farmer’s ancestral land, further enriching themselves.

But here’s the thing. The rich landowners could not be seen to be drawing up such sinful contracts, because their success was understood to be a sign of their disinterested virtue—not exploitation. Indeed, they were expected to be above such vulgar matters as contracts and such. That’s why they needed dishonest stewards. They needed someone to do the dirty work for them.

And here is where the true shrewdness of the steward is revealed. In cutting what the peasants owed, he was cutting out not only his own cut—because indeed, we can be sure he did get a cut—but also the hidden interest charged by the rich landowner. If the rich landowner were to punish him, it would beg the question why—revealing the whole sordid business going on behind the scenes. Maintaining the lie is everything in a corrupt system. It is not so much the crime—it’s the admitting of the crime—that matters. You can almost hear the so-called dishonest steward saying to his boss, “Check and mate”—and the boss responding, “well played”—as Jesus’ audience roars in appreciative laughter.

If the merciful father in the parable of the prodigal son is portrayed as being a little ridiculous—the commendation of the rich landowner is portrayed as acknowledgment that he had been out-manuevered by another smooth operator. In both cases, however, repentance is shown not to be merely some sort of other-worldly, heroic virtue, but rather a kind of canny, worldly, know-how—knowing which side our bread is buttered on. “But when he came to his senses [the prodigal son] said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands”’”—knowing, perhaps, full well, that his humility will be rewarded.

Now, let’s be clear here. Jesus is not suggesting that we should treat each other as means to an end. He is, however, pointing out that the same ingenuity, the same creativity—the same acute sense of genuine self-interest—that we bring to bear in this corrupt age, could also be brought to bear in the building of the Beloved Community.

It is not self-interest that is the problem—it is distorted self-interest. Genuine self-interest always aligns the needs of the individual with the well-being of the whole—again, to be clear—not the well-being of our family or our tribe—but the well-being of the community as a whole—all God’s people. Indeed, what is revealed in today’s parable is that the self-interest of the steward turns out to be in the interest of the commonwealth. The rich landlord is checked—the steward is not impoverished—and the peasants are given a fair deal. In the midst of all the righteous laughter, there is justice.

“And I tell you,” Jesus says, “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” Who is “they” in this last sentence? In accordance with last week’s parables, in which there is great joy in heaven over the repentance of one sinner—“they”—“those who welcome us into the eternal homes”—are obviously the heavenly host. “Be wise as a serpent,” Jesus says, “and innocent as a dove.”

Friends, we are about our Father’s business in a corrupt age. We are about our Mother’s business in a world gone wrong. Indeed, if we are truly about God’s business, we cannot keep our hands clean. We’re just going to get dirty. This isn’t about some prissy purity—this is about having the humility to know where our genuine self-interest lies in the real world. It lies in the welfare of the whole. It lies in the building of the Beloved Community. It lies in the laughing in the face of the dark forces creeping across our land. It lies in using dirty hands to tear down walls of hostility separating one from another. It lies in repentance.

(Behold! The Kingdom of God has drawn near! Just imagine what we could do with these dirty hands of ours—if we got out of God’s way—and truly allowed ourselves to trust in God’s over-flowing, super-abundant mercy.) Amen.