

Year C: Proper 20 Jer 8:18-9:1; Ps 79:1-9; 1Tim 2:1-7; Lk 16:1-13
St Barnabas, Florissant – September 22, 2019

Focus Sentence: What is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Last week, if you recall, we heard the comforting parables of the Lost Sheep, and of the Lost Coin. We reveled in the amazing truth that God will go to any lengths to FIND us and to bring us HOME, in spite of our unworthiness.

Well, this morning, we're brought face to face with an enigmatic and (I think) unsettling parable, this one about a dishonest manager, or steward, who seems to get praised by Jesus for his very dishonesty.

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The story involves a rich man and his steward, a manager who is entrusted with the day-to-day oversight of the rich man's property. This rich man may have been an absentee landlord, and the manager acted as his agent for business transactions. Of course, we don't know whether the master himself might have been a less than upstanding member of the business community. In contemporary terms, he might have been the manager of a shady hedge fund or a Ponzi scheme perpetrator, or maybe he hid company profits in tax-sheltered offshore accounts. But that's really beside the point.

In any case, as Jesus tells it, this rich man's manager finds out that an audit of the books has been commissioned. It's probable that he's already been cheating the owner of the estate he manages for some time, and he realizes that the books he's cooked can't possibly bear examination by the auditors.

And it's not just a question of being fired from his position; once the full extent of his crooked dealings is recorded and exposed, it's most likely prison for him.

Of course, this is a man who lives by his wits --- not by what he actually does, but by what he manipulates behind a desk. He knows that he wouldn't last as much as a month in the mines of his day. And he couldn't possibly make it as a hired laborer. Besides, while crafty beggars do surprisingly well for themselves --- he has assumed a lofty status in his pride --- and he will not compromise his dignity if he can avoid doing so.

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But wait! Another approach occurs to him! The auditors haven't arrived yet, so the owner hasn't seen the proof he'll need to remove him from control of the estate. If only he can steal quickly enough, maybe he can go on supporting the lavish lifestyle he's become accustomed to.

So, he hurries to call the people who've borrowed from the estate --- olive oil or wheat or other products. The borrowers can all make out fresh sets of statements that'll deprive the owner of almost half of what is owed to him.

No doubt, he'll hang onto the original invoices to be certain those debtors with whom he's conspiring will live up to their end of the deal --- or else!

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But then comes the real shocker. The owner learns what's going on, and he *commends* the scoundrel manager for his enterprising behavior! When the manager's original scam comes to light, he manages the feat of turning even *failure* to his own advantage.

This kind of bold initiative could make a difference for honest people if they were able to rise to it --- that's what this parable seems to show us. That the children of manipulation and exploitation whom we can't avoid in this world actually model for us more shrewdness and coping savvy than the children of light seem to "get" themselves.

Following through on this point, Jesus draws from the parable of the crafty manager or dishonest steward a backhanded lesson in discipleship. The admonition here is to make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest money --- apparently as the wicked steward abuses his authority to do --- so that when the money runs out, they may receive you into lasting dwellings (v. 9).

PAUSE

But wait ... this response is coming from Jesus? It seems to add up to a message that's downright immoral. It's surprising that there aren't more variant readings for the Greek text. But maybe the following is the true meaning of the passage:

Disciples must continue to live in this world as long as it endures. If their witness is to carry conviction, they'll have to be seen as effective people who can understand how the dishonest money works and who can use it with competence. Only in that way can they make friends with it --- by so managing it that it can be of help to others.

Well, maybe that helps, or maybe it doesn't.

Yet another explanation is an appeal to the underdog/trickster figure of literature; someone like Robin Hood, who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. Although we might not always condone the tactics of tricksters such as this steward-manager, we admire their pluck and willingness to take risks, and may even find ourselves cheering them on. A writer named Frederick Houk Borsch said, "The fact that the manager in many ways did not really deserve to be commended may be a means of make the Gospel's point. Grace is a surprise --- as it was to the disciples. Grace comes anyway, even to the unredeemable --- even to the manager!"

It would seem that the expedient actions of the manager --- whether dishonest or shrewd --- call to mind one of the Dalai Lama's eighteen Rules for Living: "Learn the rules so that you know how to break them properly." In a similar vein, a Greek proverb advises, "First secure an independent income, then practice virtue."

The paradox of the manager's behavior might best be summed up in Frederick Buechner's words: "The point of the Unjust Steward is that it's better to be a resourceful rascal than a saintly schmuck."

Ultimately, I think that Jesus is telling us to learn from our more worldly companions how to use the resources of this world, even dishonest money, but to be careful in doing so. Nobody can faithfully serve two masters. To serve God at the same time as you serve money is simply impossible.

At the time when Luke wrote his Gospel, to declare yourself a Christian meant risking the loss of property and even of life itself. Yet, even then, the warning against *servi*ng money was needed.

Concern for property, for preserving an enterprise or a horde of money, could lead a person to renounce Jesus for the sake of wealth. Luke wants the reader to be aware that the only wealth worth having is wealth toward God.

Certainly, money can and should be used for good. But the question again comes down to one of authority: Whom do we serve?

To use Paul Tillich's terminology, the people of God need to be sure where the "ultimate concern" lies and to maintain constant vigilance, one with another, so that they keep their top concern on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Seeking the Kingdom and its goodness is the "first principle" of faith, under which wealth and all such secondary things of the world must be subordinated.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with what John Sheila Graham has written: "The underlying meaning [of the passage] is subtle and profound. The disciples must take heed, grasp the seriousness of the need to respond to Jesus' call, and deliberately set out with a positive sense of self-interest to inherit the Kingdom. With forthrightness and vigor Jesus presses his point: 'What I say to you is this: Make friends for yourselves through your use of this world's goods, so that when they fail you, a lasting reception will be yours.' To dispose of worldly wealth in the proper way is to gain the friendship of God."

AMEN