

The True Things
A Sermon Preached by Rev. Julie Emery
The Larchmont Avenue Church
September 19, 2010
Text: Luke 16:1-13

Luke 16:1 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. 2 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.' 3 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. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7 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.' 8 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. 9 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.

Luke 16:10 "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. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 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."

Joe had been the church treasurer for all of two months when Cheri first came to him, needing money. She was one of those people at All Soul's church who everybody knew, even if they didn't want to. Her mental illness and addictions had made it hard for her to stay off the streets, and she had been the subject at many conversations around the deacons tables, as together the pastor and the church tried to discern how best they could help.

They had decided, as Joe had been informed, to help her as best they could through the pastor's discretionary fund, which sat in a marked envelope in the desk drawer in the treasurer's office. But there was always talk about the fund running out.

The previous treasurer had been one of those more anxious than not, and had begun to refuse Cheri's requests, citing the many other people who were in need. "This Church helps a lot of people," he had said, "You aren't the only one... We just can't keep giving like this..." As Cheri had been tended to by the congregation, Cheri had also begun to feel part of the family there. She worshipped regularly - some days looking so haggard some wondered if she had spent the night on the streets, other days looking so put together that at a glance she could be mistaken for any of the other housewives.

On those put together days, Cheri would walk quietly into the office as the treasurer counted the offering plate and pass over her "tithe" - a wad of rolled up bills, that might barely pay for his lunch at a restaurant. Joe would smile at Cheri, thanking her with the graciousness he poured on every one of the givers, from those who gave checks that could cover the entire heating bill for the year, to those who... well to those like Cheri.

After Cheri left, Joe would unfold the bills and stack them, count them with care, and slip them into the marked envelope and back into his drawer.¹

¹ A story shared by Kathrynzj on RevGalBlogPals for today's lectionary reading

Our parable for this morning is often called 'the parable of the dishonest or shrewd manager,' and falls immediately after Jesus tells a number of stories directed at the Pharisees about God rejoicing over the lost. He talks about losing sheep or coins, and then culminates in the story of the son who squanders his inheritance and yet returns to his father and is welcomed in with loving arms.

In our story for this morning, Jesus turns from the Pharisees toward the disciples and tells this confounding little parable. The story Jesus tells is of a rich man who has hired a manager for his estate. The manager is not making enough of a profit, either because he has been stealing or because he has poor business practices. Nevertheless, the rich man tells him he will be fired. So, anticipating his layoff the manager quickly goes to each of his clients and halves their debts, knowing that their gratitude will win him favor when he is out of work. When the rich man discovers what his manager has done, he commends the dishonest or unrighteous manager for his shrewd business practices. Jesus ends the story with a series of sayings that confuse even more: 'whoever is faithful in a very little,' he says, "is faithful in much."

If you found yourself listening to this parable and wondering what is going on; you are not alone. One commentary states: "The parable of the unjust steward had baffled interpreters since the beginning of time." Each commentary says something different, each makes different choices in interpretation. It's no wonder why many preachers avoid this text as an unplumbable mystery.

In sifting through the text, however, there are some things we can surmise. One is that while many parables can be interpreted allegorically, (including the parable of the prodigal son which immediately precedes our text for this morning) - understanding characters in the story to represent God and others to represent us; This does not seem to be one of them.

Both the rich man and the manager are unsavory in some ways. We cannot understand God as one who would commend the manager for his dishonest practices, nor can we see God as the one who cooks the books so to speak to win himself favor with his former clients. Instead it seems, that Jesus is telling a story about everyday life: this is a story about the way the world works.

And it isn't it? Change the job title and the story could come straight out of the newspaper. These are tough times. Like the experience of the manager, layoffs continue, and many still continue in fear that tomorrow it will happen to them, that tomorrow will be the day when their business practices don't make the grade, when someone else shows they can do better.

For those facing their worst fears already: college grads and the millions looking for work: it is all about who you know. Who owes who a favor, what currency one has and what it might get them. Making "friends" with the power or tools one can leverage to create the path needed. It is always boggling when a parable seems to hit upon a certain timelessness in our dealings with one another; a man who is out for himself behaves dishonestly to save his own neck.

What's harder to sort out, though, is what Jesus thinks about all of it. On the one hand the gospels are never very kind to those with money. The Jesus we meet in Luke's gospel in particular challenges those with wealth and power again and again. We hear it ring in our ears: it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle...sell all that you have and give your money to the poor... you cannot serve God and wealth... Jesus calls it "dishonest" or "unrighteous" wealth as if he thinks that all wealth is unrighteous.

On the other hand, he suggests that we might use it to make friends who might welcome us into "eternal homes." How can he commend the manager for behaving unethically? The result is confusing: does Jesus

think that all wealth is unrighteous? What does he really mean when he describes wealth and God as two opposing masters? He must know that money is useful not only for each individual but to help those in need. One cannot serve them both, he says, but the parable seems to imply that one can, and in fact perhaps one *should* use wealth to serve God.

The result of this kind of thinking is complicated. We get into very scary territory when we begin to interpret the gospel in a way that helps us to feel comfortable; when we start to see Jesus as a “genial suburban dude” who affirms our need for the security that money provides.² To be sure, Jesus is highly suspicious of wealth and power, and those who have a lot of it. His stories and parables point to the ways in which the consumer can become consumed with stuff - distracted from the “true things.”

And yet. And yet...

Jesus also seems to be saying is that there may just be a purpose for wealth and the kinds of gifts that go with it.

The power that the manager wields is a result of a faulty system in which there are haves and have nots. The rich man owns much more than his fair share, and the manager has been making his living off of collecting money that continues to keep the peasants who work the land down and the rich man flush with cash. The manager is in the middle.

For the wrong reasons, but still, in the face of crisis, the manager does something terribly radical, something only barely under his power. He forgives debts. He evens the uneven system. He extends grace, and in so doing he participates in the grace of God. Perhaps the dishonest manager is more of a prudent treasurer, like Joe who ignores the ‘ethical’ thing to act out of grace. Perhaps he is commended because even by stumbling all over himself, he discovers how his power and influence can be used so that grace may abound even more.

² A quote from Rev. David Platt via Op Ed writer David Brooks, “The Gospel of Wealth” 9/6/2010

On the heels of the story of the prodigal son, a story that continues to be told again and again about the radical nature of God's grace to forgive and welcome in even the person who most deserves wrath and punishment, Jesus tells this strange story, that seems to say: Go and do likewise.

Perhaps this points at least a little bit to what Jesus wants us to understand: that faith is not simply morality, but instead the ability to orient oneself around the grace of the gospel and, by extension, by one's ability to live out that gospel in daily life. It is catching a vision of what the world might look like if God's grace took over. It is living out a life that creates that vision now.

As one commentator put it: "It boils down to the same thing: deluded or sane, selfish or unselfish, there is no bad reason to forgive. Extending the kind of grace God shows us in every possible arena – financial and moral – can only put us more deeply in touch with God's grace."³

This means understanding that if the gifts you have are great, the burden is also. By pointing us to the manager Jesus reminds us of the power we have to participate in the grace of God. We may not be at the very top, we may not even be the one with the highest ethics in the room, but we have the ability to choose small things that have enormous results. "Whoever is faithful in a very little," Jesus says, "is faithful in much."

If you have the power to affect change...To feed the hungry as well as to work to reorient the systems that keep people in poverty; To give water to those who thirst as well as to work so that every human being has access to clean drinking water. To welcome the stranger as well as to live out the conviction that in the eyes of God there is no stranger, only friends. To forgive in a way that might transform lives as well as systems and structures of power...

³ Sarah Dylan Breuer: http://www.sarahlaughed.net/sermons/2004/09/unjustly_forgiv.html

If you have the power, or the money, or the influence, or the gifts to effect the kind of change that the Gospel points us to whether it is in small moments of grace or grand moments of forgiveness. if you can participate right now in the grace that abounds like a father who welcomes the prodigal home, like a woman who rejoices over a lost coin, like a manager who in his time of need looks to those around him and sees their need and acts - well...then what are you waiting for?

Seek the true things, and you will be rich beyond measure. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.