

September 22, 2019
Luke 16:1-13
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A Scandalous, Shrewd, Perplexing Parable

So my first thought on this gospel reading is that this parable must be a sermon illustration gone awry.

I mean, believe me, I know about sermon illustrations gone awry. There have been times when I have told a story from the pulpit and in my head it seems really clear what the story means. But then someone will say something on their way out of worship, or a few weeks later someone will make reference to my story and I think, “Oh. You definitely heard something different than what I thought I was saying.”

And so I wonder if maybe Jesus were here and heard what scholars and everyday Bible readers were saying about his sermon illustration in Luke 16—which, to be clear, what people are mostly saying is something like, “Huh?”—then Jesus would say, “Oh. You definitely heard something different than what I thought I was saying.”

It seems like even Luke was a little confused here. After the parable he tacks on four different statements that seem to suggest four different interpretations of the parable, about dishonest wealth and children of the light acting shrewdly, and serving different masters, and that seems to make it even more weird.

Unfortunately, Jesus isn't here in person to explain to us a little more what he meant. The good news is that Jesus has given us community in which to wrestle with the confusing bits of Scripture, and so hopefully we can sit together here with this story, and see one or two of the paths that this parable could lead us down.

So what's happening here? Well, Jesus is with his disciples. Immediately before telling this parable, he was hanging out with tax collectors and sinners, and some of the religious leaders were grumbling about this. So Jesus responded by telling a few parables, two of which we read last week about the lost sheep and the lost coin. And then he tells a story about a lost son, what we often refer to as the Prodigal Son, who squanders his father's riches and ends up experiencing lavish grace.

There's no pause between those stories and this next part, where Jesus tells this parable about the rich man and the manager who squanders his master's riches. So it seems to be deliberate that these stories are meant to be read together. We hear this parable with these ideas of being lost and found and repentance and grace ringing in our ears.

The story is this: there's a rich man, who had a manager of his properties. That's how it worked in those days. The Romans would tax small farmers so much that they couldn't afford it, so a rich man would swoop in and say, I'll tell you what, farmer, I'll pay your taxes for you. All you have to do is give me the deed to your land. But it's ok, you can keep farming on this land, and just give me a

portion of what you produce on the land. And then they'd hire a manager to be the one to collect from the farmers, to squeeze as much out of them as possible.

I know it's probably hard to imagine a system of absentee landlords and the rich getting richer off the backs of the poor, but see if you can picture that in your head.

So word gets back to the rich man that his particular manager wasn't doing his job. We have no idea if that's true or not, we have no idea what the charge was against him, but the manager knows that the gig is up and he's about to lose his job. So he thinks, what am I going to do? I'm not strong enough to do physical labor, and I'm too proud to beg.

He decides what he'll do is subvert the whole system. Up until this point, he's been trying to get wealth out of those below him to serve those above him. He decides instead to direct his energy toward the poor and oppressed, to freely forgive debts, to give away the very thing he'd been charged with protecting.

He calls the debtors in and lowers their bills. In the process he gives up a significant percentage of his own income, which he would have earned through these transactions.

Does he do this with a fair amount of self-interest? Sure. But the end result is this subversive reversal of the way things work in the world, not unlike Mary's Magnificat, where we hear the lowly are lifted up, and the hungry are filled, and the rich are sent away empty. This man realizes that new life for him is not to be found in accumulating wealth, but rather by giving it away.

Remember, this story is told in response to the religious leaders complaining about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. The religious leaders loved money, the text later tells us, and they loved things being done according to the rules, what they considered the proper way to do things. With this one parable Jesus challenges the religious leaders on both those fronts. This manager is scandalous because he breaks the rules of how things are "supposed to be," looking out for the interests of poor rather than the rich. And he doesn't do it in a very respectable way; he does it in this shrewd, subversive way that benefits the debtors, who have done nothing to earn the forgiveness of their debts.

But then again, Jesus wasn't the most respectable guy either. He broke the sabbath. He hung out with tax collectors and sinners. And he died a criminal.

But the message of Jesus over and over is that grace doesn't come in respectable ways.¹ It comes in ways that may not look fair, may not look right, in ways that subvert the systems that we humans have set up to hoard what we've been given. And he does it in a way that benefits the debtors—remember, that includes us—who have done nothing to earn the forgiveness of our debts.

¹ For more on this theme, see Robert Farrar Capon's book, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*

So I wonder if one way to interpret this sermon illustration gone awry is to consider what it might look like for us to act like this manager, an imperfect character to be sure, but one who ends up reflecting an awful lot of Jesus' life in the way he ends up conducting himself.

What if the way forward for our church is to give away the very gifts we've been guarding so carefully behind our church doors? What if life is to be found in freeing sharing forgiveness, love, and grace to those who so desperately need it, whether we think they are worthy or not?

What if the way forward for our families is to give away the very gifts we've been guarding so carefully in our bank accounts and in our abundance of possessions? What if life is to be found in generously sharing our wealth and possessions, rather than simply using it for ourselves?

After all, Jesus says, we cannot serve both God and wealth. Jesus in Luke's gospel just won't stop talking about money, so I suppose at some point we have to look at our own budgets and our own spending patterns and consider who we are really serving. What might it look like if this manager got a hold of our checking accounts and used them in the service of God and neighbor? What would happen if we all committed ourselves to giving a percentage of our income away?

Maybe this isn't a sermon illustration gone awry. Maybe this is just a hard message for us to hear.

But oh, the new life in Christ that awaits us when we do!