

Last night I got home from a three-day trip out of town to find an envelope from the Diocese of Western North Carolina. It contained a letter from Bishop Taylor. “In case you haven’t heard,” he wrote, “we are now in a position to pay off the debt on our Lake Logan Conference Center. But we need your help. Several years ago you pledged to pay a certain amount of money to help reduce that debt, and our records show there is still a balance on your pledge.” Unfortunately, it’s true. I made the pledge. Soon after I made my first payment, my world turned upside down, and I completely forgot my promise. There were no reminders from the diocese that I was obligated to them, and, unfortunately, no lightbulb flashed in my head to tell me to write a check. I must say that it’s embarrassing to get a letter from your boss reminding you that you haven’t fulfilled your obligation. I’ll be putting a check in the mail on Monday, and though I’m happy to have some personal understanding of the actions of the manager in today’s Gospel lesson, I wish the Holy Spirit had found a different way to inform me!

This Gospel lesson from Luke is often called the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. I pulled out my King James Bible and found that it calls the man a steward. That isn’t a word we hear much anymore, and for that reason “manager” may help us better understand the meaning. Either way, we should know that this man was in charge of his boss’s business. That’s what a manager or a steward does, and there is an undefined expectation that the manager is honest, trustworthy, competent, and capable of performing his or her work in the same way the boss would, or at least to the best of his or her skills, gifts and understanding. The guy in this lesson may have fit that description when he was left in charge. Maybe his life turned upside down after the rich man left; we don’t know. But for whatever reason, he didn’t carry out his responsibilities. In fact, he was negligent.

The word “squander” implies this was much more than an unfortunate situation; it was foolish, wasteful, and negligent; incompetent at best, intentional at worst, more than just embarrassing, and more than could be taken care of with the ease of putting a check in the mail. We listen as the manager is fired from his position and then concocts a plan that he hopes will get him off the hook. Much to our surprise, it does! Even though he will still come up short, the rich man approves of the manager’s shrewdness, even compliments him, saying “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” What??? We’re left scratching our heads, trying to figure out why this man’s dishonesty has been rewarded and how *we* are to use the parable to become faithful managers ourselves. Nowhere is it written that dishonesty is a desirable Christian attribute!

One place to start the process of understanding is by imagining who Jesus meant when he assigned the roles in this parable. First, of course, is the dishonest but crafty manager. Then there are the debtors, who are themselves less than honest, as they prove with their willingness to go along with the manager’s scheme. And finally, there is the rich man, who is apparently somewhat crafty himself, since he appears to be impressed with his manager’s plan to make a bad situation better. Who are these people? Here are three possible scenarios:

One scenario is that when Jesus told this parable, he did so with humor—that the example he gave of the rich man, the manager, and the debtors was so ludicrous that no one could ever give it any credibility. Jesus was not afraid to use humor, and that makes this scenario possible but perhaps not plausible to those of us who seek to follow Christ as scripture teaches us. Frederick Buechner might have been on to something when he wrote, “I suspect that Jesus spoke many of his parables as a kind of sad and holy joke and that that may be part of why he seemed reluctant to explain them, because if you have to explain a joke, you might as well save your breath.”¹ While that

¹ Synthesis, Year C, Proper 20 – Postscript, September 18, 2016.

observation may seem farfetched to us, could it be that for Jesus the humor and sarcasm was obvious and he expected it would also be obvious for those who followed him?

Another scenario is that the manager represents us, followers and lovers of God who created us, who have not only been assigned the responsibility of stewardship of all that God has created and given to us; but also have accepted the responsibility to “dress, till, and keep the earth,” as Genesis tells us, and to have dominion over all that God created. If that is the case, if we are the entrusted stewards of what has been given us, then we must assume that the rich man is God, the owner of all that has been provided for us. Who, then, are the debtors? Could they be those who don’t know God, who don’t know and understand that all of us, as God’s beloved, are indebted to God, and that the way we repay God is through careful and thoughtful management of what God has given us?

Then there is the third scenario. Here again, God is identified as the rich man. But in this scenario, it is Jesus who is the manager and we who are the debtors. While we could never say that our Lord was dishonest or conniving, we could very easily say that he stepped outside the box to bring people to God. As Robert Farrar Capon wrote, “This parable says in story form what Jesus himself said by his life. He was not respectable. He broke the Sabbath. He consorted with crooks. And he died as a criminal. Now at last in the light of this parable, we see why he refused to be respectable; he did it to catch a world that respectability could only terrify and condemn.”²

Which of these three scenarios is the key to our understanding? Is it only one of them, or could it be all of them? Jesus has more to say in explanation. Listen again to verse thirteen:

"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."

To paraphrase, “You can either serve this present age and love its treasures, or you can love God and serve him in this present age. But you cannot do both. One leads to death. The other leads to life.”³ To live in the light and life of Christ means that we must live *for* the light and life of Christ. That means we don’t let ourselves be distracted by the troubles and worries of temptations and earthly needs that surround us every day, but instead rely on God to guide us so that who we are and how we live begins and ends with God and not with the craziness that surrounds us. In the parable of the dishonest manager, God calls us to reclaim who we are and whose we are, to renew our vision for the kingdom of God, now and in the world to come. May we never forget that all we are and all we have are gifts from God, and whatever we give to God came from God in the first place.

So it was, so it is, and so it will be. *Amen.*

T

² Synthesis, Year C, Proper 20 – Tradition, September 18, 2016.

³ Helen Montgomery Debevoise, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Proper 20, Pastoral Perspective, p. 96.