

## Faithful in a Little

Luke 16:1-13

This is a sermon I didn't want to preach! Why in the world would Christian scholars make this a part of the Lectionary? The parable of the dishonest steward poses significant challenges, especially the apparent instruction to imitate the unrighteous behavior of the main character. Why would Jesus make an example for godly living so unsavory? The parable presents as the model for our faith someone whose life is the complete opposite of everything Christ ever taught. Jesus wove a story in which the main character is a shyster—a lazy, conniving, self-centered manager of someone else's treasure. He was out for personal gain, to save his own skin. We lean forward because we want to see this scoundrel get what is coming to him, and when the master finally speaks, we are shocked. The ending is not satisfying because instead of being defeated, this scoundrel triumphed. His plan succeeded. His former boss, the one whose estate he had previously mismanaged, praised him for being ingenious. We sigh in disbelief that the manager did not get his due. Adding to the insult, there is still one last surprise. The parable ends by saying: The scoundrel gets it. Believers do not.

So let us examine the story. A wealthy man had a financial manager, who was "squandering" (or was he "mismanaging"?) his resources. When it became obvious that he would lose his job, he said to himself, "I am not strong enough to dig for a living, and I am too ashamed to beg." Clearly a shrewd character, he called in two men, who owed his master olive oil and wheat, and asked each of them to reduce the amount owed the master. Whether the two men had their customary cut reduced, or simply had lowered the amount owed the master, is impossible to tell. In either case, they would have to repay less, and thus the manager had successfully placed them in his debt. Of course, the time of reckoning came when the wealthy man discovered what his manager had done and, in a shocking dramatic climax, commended him for it.

So what is there anything redemptive or redeemable about this parable? The clue comes in the final phrase of verse 9, "welcome you into the eternal homes." The NRSV translation of this final word, *skēnas* ("tents"), as "homes" unfortunately covers over a key element in the story. The translation is obviously meant to parallel the "homes" (*oikous*) that the steward seeks in verse 4. The parable, however, turns precisely on the fact that Jesus does *not* promise "homes" but "tents." Jesus does not promise to provide what the unjust steward sought, the stable abode of those who have possessions and security. Rather, Jesus promises the unstable abode of the wanderer, the refugee, and the pilgrim, whose mobility requires the dispossession of goods.

Perhaps Jesus told this parable to call us to dissipate wealth as the steward did, but in order to be dispossessed of the desire that our gifting produce the benefit of indebting others to us—indeed, to be dispossessed of the illusion that wealth gives us security and stability. Only as we are freed by our holy squandering are we made able to live the pilgrim life of those nomads who have relinquished the possessions that possess them. As Walter Brueggemann notes, one of the central insights of the gospel is the paradox that "letting go is to have and keeping is the way to lose." This parable, in a roundabout way, brings us back to this insight and so reinforces the words of Luke 12:32: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." In light of this reading, the call to be "faithful" in 16:10-12 is precisely the call to have faith in the one who provides—enough faith to relinquish our grip on the wealth we think will protect us in order to receive the "true riches" (16:11) of the "unfailing treasure in heaven" (12:33).

If we read this way, the problem with the unjust steward is not that he "gifted" his master's debtors (even his master commends him for this), but that his gifting was poisoned by the ulterior motive of receiving something back from those to whom he gave. Jesus encourages his listeners to imitate the man's scattering of wealth in order to receive the gift that is beyond return and outside any economy of exchange—an "eternal" tenting in which one is received not into a settled domain but into a triune life that is eternally on the move. Scott Bader-Saye

Here is a slightly different way to read the text: Among those in the crowd to whom Jesus addresses this parable are the Pharisees, whom Luke's narrator characterizes as "lovers of money" (v. 14). Leaders of the chosen people, keepers of the treasures of God, they were like the dishonest steward. They had lost their vision of who God had called them to be. They had traded their call to be God's people to become servant of the treasures of the present day. Controlled by wealth, by money, they had blended into society and lost their vision. To these Jesus says, to paraphrase verse 13, "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."

However we interpret the role of the unjust steward, children who walk in the light of the Lord, understand this: We not only are entrusted with the vision of the kingdom of heaven; we are given the treasures of the King! Even in the present age, with the imperfect treasures of this world, we are stewards of God. However we use what we have before us, we should use these gifts in light of our eternal relationship with God.

The parable warns that the children have lost that eternal perspective of who God is and who we are in relationship to God. Too easily we separate life as it is now from life in the future kingdom. Not long ago, we shouted, "He is alive!" but already we are whispering our faith because we do not quite believe it anymore.

Somewhere in the middle of our journey we stopped living for Christ. We stopped believing that Jesus died and was resurrected and that life was made new. Somewhere along the way it became easy to serve all those pressing demands: of people, of schedule, of money. Somewhere along the way, the vision for God's call became cloudy and muddled. We stopped hearing God's voice and joined the crazy survivor-takes-all mentality. Somewhere along the way, the challenges seemed so much bigger than the answers. So we huddled in an effort to save whatever was left and forgot about living for something greater. We buried our treasures.

This is the crisis that Jesus addresses in his parable. The children of light have lost the vision for God. It is easy to grow complacent about responsibilities God gives us. The

parable is a call to reclaim who we are and to renew our vision today for the kingdom of God beyond us and among us. Helen Montgomery Debevoise

The concluding sayings of Jesus in verses 10-13 underscore the relationship between the material possessions we have and what we do with them. Faithfulness and responsibility are the qualities specified. Ironically Jesus asked, How will friends made from dishonest wealth be able to welcome them into the "eternal homes"? "You cannot serve God and wealth" (v. 13). We acknowledge that the manager responded to a crisis appropriate to his circumstances. As Johnson argued, "In other words, the manager is praised for having the qualities of a manager! It is this quality of responsiveness rather than the possible morality of the action that is the object of praise." The cleverness that we, the children of light, are to develop is precisely that we confront and contend with the issues of our own generation, particularly in the matter of material goods. The people of "this age" are cleverer with respect to the crises facing them than are the children of light with respect to "what is prized" by us (v. 15).

So God is calling us to be faithful in the little we have been given. By showing faithfulness in this little in the area of money management, then we can be trusted with the spiritual and godly things. Let us strive to master these things that are most important. Serving God means that loving people is always the bottom line. On yesterday we had the fall family feast. Some of us were disappointed because only 8 youth attended. Some were disappointed about the age limits we set. But what if we rejoiced because 20+ families participated by giving donations, by coming to help set-up, by hosting the event! What if we celebrated because 8 youth were blessed! 20+ families were blessed! 30+ individuals helped and were blessed! For those disappointed about the age limits, but isn't it exciting that next time we can plan for younger children! Nothing we do for Christ goes unnoted! So Jesus' closing words, are certainly an apt summation of what Jesus is so ardently and adamantly trying to get across: you cannot serve God and wealth (v. 13). G. Penny Nixon Love and serve one another and so fulfill the law of Christ!

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