

Pentecost 18 – C (2016)
Luke 16:1-13

What are we supposed to make of our gospel passage today? Today's reading from Luke was and remains thoroughly shocking to most "conventional" understandings of morality or of Jesus. Here, Jesus praises a cheater. He tells his disciples to use "dishonest money" as a means to be welcomed into eternal homes. And he says it's impossible to serve both God and money at the same time. Maybe the last of these three isn't so shocking.

But the first two?

It seems there are almost three separate sections to our passage today: the one about the wasteful manager, the part about faithfulness and finally the last part about two masters. Jesus himself seems to have attached no fewer than three interpretations, but two of those are not easily understood and the third one, which is not hard to grasp, doesn't seem to follow logically from this particular parable. (Or maybe the three are simply Luke's attempts to interpret it, taking statements Jesus made in other places about wealth and attaching them here.)

As I mentioned last week, Jesus is often trying to expand our understanding of truth and see a larger truth than what might be our usual understandings – to see kingdom values in Jesus' parables.

A Salvation Army magazine once told the story of three American chaplains who were quartered in a German castle during the last days of World War II. They made friends with the old German baron who owned the castle and promised to visit him when the war was over. They kept their promise, only to find the castle completely bombed out and the poor baron living alone in just one little basement room. He was overjoyed to see the chaplains, and from under his makeshift bed, he produced a bottle of vintage champagne. "I've been saving this just for you," he said. "I'm sorry," one chaplain said. "I'm a Baptist, and I don't drink." "I'm a Methodist, and my discipline won't let me drink either," said another. The third was a Salvation Army man, probably more opposed to alcohol than the other two. But he said, "Even though we are chaplains, one of us has to be a Christian." As he shared the champagne and drank a toast to the reunion, he saw tears of joy in the old man's eyes and knew he had done what was right. That's "using your

worldly resources to benefit others and make friends." That's the law of love which is higher than all other laws. By that law even a dishonest steward can make friends who will receive him "into an eternal home."

In our attempts to try to understand Scripture, we often assign roles to the characters in Jesus' parables. One of the reasons our passage today may be confusing is because we always put ourselves in some other role, when in fact, we are the manager. We're constantly trying to find a balance, constantly trying to serve God and wealth.

Nowhere does Jesus put God into the story; it may be just a description of the way things are. And the servant may not actually be dishonest. Some commentators have suggested the manager may not be cheating the rich man by reducing the creditor's bills but may instead have been reducing or eliminating his own commission.

Everybody is trying to make the system work the best way they can to get what they need. It's a scramble for survival and the manager knows exactly what is going on and he's going to work it for his own good. It's a systemic thing and we're caught in it too. We have an ideal vision of the kingdom, but we're caught in systems we don't even understand. God is pained by that, but, at the same time, God is committed to remaining part of the mix.

I don't think we can blunt or explain away the shocking elements of the story. They simply are shocking. They seem entirely out of character with most pictures of "gentle, benign Jesus." This is a "crazy, counter-cultural, dangerous" Jesus. Using a dishonest manager as a positive example? There was no account of virtue in the ancient world that could make sense of what Jesus was doing here.

It was just shocking. On purpose.

To shock people into just how radically new and different the way the kingdom of God and disciples in that kingdom are.

It is while his disciples, others who heard him, and perhaps we ourselves are still reeling in shock from what Jesus has just said that he introduces something we *think* we might understand. Maybe. "Whoever is faithful with little is faithful also with much."

But given what Jesus has just done with our "conventional" ideas of morality and money, what in the world does "faithful with little" mean? Faithful to whom? Faithful in what way? Whatever it is, it's not about playing by anything like the usual rules.

Maybe in verse 13 we see a glimmer of an answer. “You cannot serve God and wealth.” So maybe the faithfulness being commended is faithfulness to God.

Our response to the passage today, I believe, has to be about faith. As Hebrews 11.1 suggests, the essence of faith is that we act on “more than meets the eye.” “Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.” The point of the parable is this, according to Jesus: “No slave can serve two masters.” So Jesus here is talking about commitment. You cannot maintain a dual focus on short-term profits and long-term security. You have to pick one or the other, and give it your undivided attention. As is true in the story of the dishonest manager, there are times in which we have to sacrifice the commissions of this world so that we’ll have the eternal comforts of God’s world. Laying out our choice in a crystal-clear contrast, Jesus concludes today’s passage by saying, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (v. 13).

Our mandate as Christians is not to spurn worldly wealth, but to consecrate it, or as John Wesley said, to make as much we can, honestly and skillfully, save as much as we can so we can give as much as we can and to make certain that for us it’s not an end we seek, but a means we exercise . . . all to the glory of God.

Jesus doesn’t explicitly put God in the parable, but if we assign roles to the characters in the story and if you assume that God is the rich man, then you have a situation where God is so benevolent, no matter what the mistakes I make and the sins I commit, I’m forgiven and somehow God turns everything around and makes it good and right.

The amazing thing is how we, who like to think of ourselves as “the children of the light,” hear this story and can be overwhelmed by the vastness and wideness of God’s blessing. God’s grace offers us opportunity after opportunity to use what we have been given to bless others – not to hoard it for ourselves, but to look for the good of others. Seeing the “light” in us allows others to see the light of God. Even though we sin, waste or misuse the resources we have been given, we are still offered another chance: to use what we have here and now for a larger purpose and for another place and reality: the now and future kingdom of God.