

Grace Episcopal Church Galena IL
September 22, 2013
Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Text—Luke 16: 1-13

Just so you know, the parable from Luke's Gospel that Linda just read to us is known by commentators, some of the best preachers and scholars—both past and present—as "the most puzzling parable" in the Gospels, (Homiletics), "the toughest text to preach in all the lectionary" (Willimon). Most everything I read in my studies this week seemed to be trying to figure it out by explaining away the difficult parts, domesticating it, forcing this round peg of a story into a square hole of what lessons we would expect Jesus to teach us. Most of these attempts did not ring true. The chances of my solving this puzzle when the giants of Biblical interpretation have failed are dim indeed.

It is, of course, a parable. And we know about parables, Jesus' favorite way of teaching. They are not straightforward. Oh, they start with a situation that is familiar to the listeners, a day-to-day life situation. But there is usually a twist in the plot, a surprise, an ambiguous ending that allows for more than one meaning. But this one, often called "the dishonest manager" or "the unjust steward" or even "the shrewd manager" is over the top. If nothing else, it is a prime example of why it is not possible to understand scripture in a literal way. For if we do, it is likely that we come away thinking that Jesus was approving of the actions of a scoundrel and that, perhaps, the end justifies the means, even if the means are a bit dishonest.

Listen to parts of this again: the manager has just been accused by his boss of squandering/wasting the boss' possessions and has been asked for an accounting and is going to be relieved of his job as manager. "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I am not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg—when this gets around, I'll never get another job! I know what I'll do! " And, at that point, he goes out to the tenant farmers who owe his boss more rent than they can possibly pay and he cuts deals with them. He reduces the debt they owe—the amount they will pay his boss. And then comes the kicker. Instead of being even more furious with this manager, his boss praises his cleverness! And, apparently, Jesus is impressed, too. What was Jesus thinking? What point do you suppose he wanted us to take home from this odd little story?

We need a few tools of analysis here, some understanding of what those first century folk were hearing, what their frame of reference might have been. So, a bit of historical and social digging is in order. First, we need to know that this parable probably ends right here, midway through verse 8. Apparently, the author of Luke had just as much trouble with this as we do and threw in his own interpretation and later editors added some loosely related sayings about how we handle money and possessions. With that material set off to the side, we can focus on why the business reacted as he did.

Maybe it helps, too, if we understand that this manager wasn't much like the managers we think of today. Most managers today are a few steps up on the organizational ladder, professionals with a good education and track records of success. The one in this story—and in the ancient world—was more likely to have come from one of the tenant farmer families eking out a very spare living on the land of that fabulously rich owner—someone in a tenuous place dependent entirely on

the good will of his boss. It might be that his ancestors originally owned the land but lost it to the rich guy.

We don't know what his specific duties were or why he was accused of wasting. All we know is that when he found himself in the crisis of losing his job—and having virtually no chance of getting another, he assessed the situation and took desperate action—he "cooked the books" and, surprisingly, ended up impressing his boss. How can that be? Here's where the shrewdness comes in. By lowering the debt, the tenants might actually be able to pay, where before, they just were sinking deeper and deeper. They would surely be happy—they would think this manager was a terrific guy. In fact, they probably would think the owner is terrific, too, because they don't know that the manager is doing this on his own. So, the people's debts are partially forgiven, the owner has become a hero in the eyes of the people, and the manager has regained some respect (and, perhaps, isn't going to be fired after all). And, maybe, the owner really isn't out all that much money. We don't know the details, but maybe the manager, in his desperation, simply reduced the debts by the amount of his own commissions—or maybe he had even been overcharging them with the intent of pocketing the difference.

There is also an element of outfoxing the owner here. Think about it. After the manager lowered the debts, the owner had two choices. He could have reversed it, said that the manager had no authority. But then, he would have created a tremendous amount of ill will. The Middle Eastern world was a culture of honor and shame and of relationships. In that society, the owner would have been shamed both by reneging on the deal and by the perception that he couldn't handle his employee. His other option was to go along with it and accept the honor of being seen as generous and caring. This, of course, is what he did, and everyone appeared to win. There seemed to be a happy ending. The manager wouldn't been thrown into slavery. The owner was a hero, and the tenants might just have enough oil and wheat to feed their own families. All is well.

It is easy to see why the owner commends his manager. What is harder is why it appears that Jesus did so. Some commentators say that Jesus admired how he took swift and decisive action. That he could clearly see what resources he had and make the choice of how to use them. Not that Jesus approved of the manager's self-serving methods. But time was running short--in Luke's gospel, Jesus is still on that final journey to Jerusalem. It is time for those disciples to take hold and begin acting like disciples--walking in Jesus' ways, caring for his people. That would take shrewdness. Decisive action in standing against the unjust powers.

It is not so different today. Like the tenants in the story, people are trapped in never-ending cycles of poverty without the means to free themselves. Just last week, there was a column in the *New York Times* about payday loans. A North Carolina non-profit released a study showing that most people who borrowed in this way repeatedly rolled over or renewed the loans, incurring interest rates up to 400%. There have been calls for tougher regulation of such predatory lending practices. But it isn't that simple. Where else would people get the money they need? Not at a bank! They wouldn't qualify. Furthermore, some of those "too big to fail" banks are funding the payday loan industry.

Then, there's this week's House vote to dramatically cut the food stamp program. The examples abound. How might we be shrewd? What decisive action might we take? If you're like me, these problems seem too big, too complex. I wonder what effect one person might have. I put the moveon.org petitions in the e-mail trash. I shop sometimes at Walmart, because it is convenient, even though I don't approve of their employment practices.

My friend Julie didn't just sit around complaining. She dashed off a letter to the Speaker of the House about the food stamp vote. She took the time and made the effort. Just one letter. Just one decisive voice.

Last week, too, Starbucks announced that it would not allow guns in its stores. That was a change in policy. Why? Because of the outcry of its customers. Yes, perhaps it was an economic decision. Nevertheless, they listened. Over a year ago, a seminarian doing an internship at an Episcopal Church in Chicago started the Crosswalk initiative--it has become a citywide movement against the gun violence that has taken so many lives--many of them children. Last week Grace's Outreach Committee sent a check to support this effort, which is this year's Bishop's appeal. In the neighborhood where I lived, citizens are regularly hanging out together on street corners where violence has occurred. It appears that it is working. Sure, they want a safer neighborhood to live in, but not just for themselves.

Perhaps this is where the extra verses that are not part of the parable come in. Someone's-- Luke's?--attempt to make sense of it. The people of the age seem to do a better job of dealing with their generation than the people of the light. There are things we can learn in our generation. Not the dishonesty, of course. But we must be engaged with our generation, not disconnected. Then the well-known admonition that we cannot serve both wealth and God. When wealth becomes our -- idol, God is pushed aside.

Following Jesus takes us out of our comfort zones. It is not just the comfy, good feelings we get worshipping together on Sunday mornings. Or easy gospel stories of healing and feeding. It's difficult, confusing parables like this one. Messy—just like life. There may not be clear cut answers to all of the dilemmas we face—tidy lessons to guide us in every instance. So, I leave this parable for you—and for me—to continue to chew on. How do we, when confronted by the confusing and unjust situations in our world, address them decisively and faithfully, not only for our own good but for the good of one another and, ultimately, for God's good in bringing about the realm of justice and peace?

Amen.