

“A Story of Mercy”

“The master commended the dishonest manager” (Luke 16:8).

Jesus loves to tell a story. In fact, the Gospels are filled with them. Some deal with agriculture, others describe weddings or banquets, and still others are set in the business world. Jesus used these earthly stories to convey teachings about the Kingdom of God. Some of Jesus’ parables are easy to understand and others are more difficult, but of the nearly 40 parables found in the four Gospels, none is more shocking than the parable from today’s reading from Luke.

Here, Jesus tells the story of a steward who had been given the authority to manage his master’s affairs, only to be found wasting the rich man’s possessions. Jesus doesn’t name the abuse, but it’s worth noting that He described the sin of the manager with the same Greek verb we see in the parable of the Prodigal Son who, Jesus said, “squandered his wealth in wild living” (Luke 15:13). The point is that the manager in our parable wasn’t just unlucky or unqualified for his job, this man was unethical, and he was dishonest. He had sinned against the master, and for this betrayal, his position had been eliminated.

In response to his firing, the manager in our parable makes a bold decision. Knowing that he would soon be on the street, the dishonest manager called in the master’s debtors and, one by one, he proceeded to cut them deals. Before the news of his termination had hit the streets, the shrewd manager began to slash the debts owed to the master, turning one man’s bill of 100 measures of oil into 50, and adjusting another’s bill from 100 measures of wheat to 80. The manager used the little influence he still had to make friends of the master’s debtors so that when his position was gone, he would be able to call in some favors.

It’s a puzzling parable, yet we see stories like this all the time – politicians who use their positions for personal gain, wealthy executives who pad their bank accounts while destroying the companies they run. The dishonesty of the manager is nothing new to us. No, the shocking part of this parable comes in the reaction of the master. Luke writes that the “master commended the dishonest manager” (Luke 16:8). But before we get too worked up over this disturbing story, we need to view this parable in another light.

Remember, a parable is “an earthly story that teaches a heavenly truth,” and in this respect, Jesus certainly tells a great earthly story. It grabs our attention and leaves us scratching our heads, and yet, if we allow ourselves to get bogged down in the earthly analogy presented in this parable, we can miss the heavenly truth Jesus is teaching.

You see, this parable is only shocking to us when we fail to see ourselves in it. It’s easy for us to relate to the betrayed master, and it’s also easy for us to stand on the outside and criticize the sin of the unethical steward, but in all truth, the character of the dishonest manager shows us ourselves. We are the ones who have misused and abused the master’s trust. We are the ones who have squandered the gifts that God has so freely given to us, and, like the steward in the story, we have forsaken the Master, and we have forgotten where our resources came from. Or, to use the words of Jesus from today’s reading, we’ve served money, rather than God!

When we view this parable from the outside, it bothers us because it isn't even close to being fair. A manager who has been blatantly dishonest and boldly unethical is celebrated. A master's trust has been betrayed, and a character who should be condemned is commended. It's simply not fair, and it makes no sense! But when we view this parable from the inside, from the perspective of the dishonest manager, and when we confront our own selfishness, and understand that we have misused God's gifts and deserve to be cut off, the focus of the parable turns our hearts from the sins of the steward, and it reveals a story of mercy.

You see, there *is* a heavenly truth in today's parable. And this truth tells us that even though we have been dishonest stewards and unethical managers, and even though we have selfishly sinned against God and deserve condemnation, we have been commended by the merciful Master.

This is always the scandal of the Gospel! God *doesn't* give us what we deserve, and in this way, God certainly doesn't treat us fairly. You see, there is only one faithful Manager; and there is only one honest Steward; and this faithful and honest One was condemned in our place. The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, took the punishment that we deserved, so that we could be commended by the Master. Or, as the apostle Peter writes, "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (I Peter 3:18).

This means that for our sins of selfishness, Christ died. This means that for our sins of dishonest stewardship, Christ died. This means that for our lack of faith, and for our incessant greed, for our intentional betrayal and lack of self-control, and for our lust and gossip and anger, and for all of the sins that separate us from God and others, Christ died! And the result is that today we stand before God as forgiven people; as innocent and pure and righteous in the sight of God as Christ Himself. And because of this truth, today, we are commended by the Master!

One of the most important parts of this parable comes in Jesus' explanation when He says, "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9). Did you catch that? "So that...they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." And here is another heavenly teaching! Because of what Christ has done for us, our lives have been redeemed, and the things of this world now have eternal significance. Jesus isn't telling us to diversify our portfolios or invest our emotional capital wisely so that we'll have some options in case we fall on hard times. No. Here, Jesus is telling us that God has given us all that we have in this earthly life *to make a heavenly difference*, and because we have been commended by a merciful Master, we can now use the gifts He has given us to lead others into eternal dwellings.

In today's reading from I Timothy, we are told that, "God our Savior...desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." And when we use our earthly gifts for eternal purposes – when we spend our time, dedicate our talents, and use our resources to share God's love and forgiveness – the heavenly teaching of this earthly parable becomes a reality, and the Master's story of mercy continues to be told, and when it is, people are saved. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold