

Today we wrap up our summer preaching series on parables in Luke's Gospel. As I said in June, the same parable can leave multiple impressions over time- thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit among us. Parables aren't children's stories. No, they're designed to provoke or indict. **Jesus used parables to invite others to see what God is doing in the world from a new perspective.** Dr. A.J. Levine, a NT scholar and a Jew, says, "We might be better off thinking less about what parables 'mean' and more about what they can 'do': remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb..." (pp. 3-4). Moreover, let us remember that Luke's Gospel is countercultural- opposite of what was/is normal in the culture. We especially need these reminders in looking at today's parable, which is said to be the most challenging of Jesus' parables. Scholars are not on one accord as to what this parable is about. I certainly don't have any definitive answers to my questions. Maybe that's the ultimate point of Jesus' parables- to enter in and keep wrestling (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net)? This parable is sandwiched in between the parables of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32) and the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). Today's parable is the parable of the Clever or Shrewd, Dishonest Manager or Steward, depending on the translation, and in this parable, Jesus is addressing his own disciples- not the Pharisees or scribes- but us. Before reading God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ. Luke 16:1-8.**

Of all the characters that the Lord could have chosen as a positive role model, he chose the dishonest manager- a guy who is commended for acting cleverly to save his own hide! He is fired because his boss man

heard rumors that he cooked the books but there is no investigation that we know of. The manager doesn't defend himself but thinks carefully about his next move. He then goes out and acts both cleverly and selfishly, making decisions that are no longer his to make. But his former boss man doesn't even get angry when he finds out what his ex-employee has done. One of the challenges in this parable is knowing where Jesus wants us to side. There are many interpretative possibilities and paths that we could take in this parable; each opens us up to questions (Barbara Rossing, workingpreacher.org). Many Christians have been offended by this parable over the years. One of the main reasons is "that some find it disturbing that Jesus would find anything commendable in a person who has acted dishonestly. Why that should prove offensive is not fully clear, for everyone is a mixed bag of the commendable and the less commendable" (Fred Craddock, *Interpretations*). Others are offended that Jesus is asking his disciples to be "shrewd" or "clever." "Jesus describes a world we know only too well! A world in which dishonesty, corruption, self-interest, and ill-gotten wealth rule the day. A world in which selfish ambition often secures praise and prosperity, while honesty garners cynicism and contempt [and false rumors]. A world in which the heavy burden of debt cripples people both financially and morally. A world in which unfairness, exploitation, and privilege are so systemic, we barely notice- much less protest. A world in which ethical living is neither straightforward nor easy" (Thomas). Did you know that in the state of SC, there is no limit to how much interest a lender can charge? Loan sharks can charge upwards of 900%. It's called predatory lending, and it should be against

the law. If you're poor or down on your luck or desperate, you know predatory lending and have more than likely been a victim of it. Did you know Susan Stall and other faithful members of our community are working to change legislation to cap the percentage rate at 36%, which is still high but a whole heck of a lot better than 100%, let alone more. This kind of lending is more than likely what is taking place in today's story. "Wealthy landlords in Jesus' day created 'ways to charge interest under other guises,' often hiding interest by rolling it into the principal. We don't know if the rich man nor the manager were Jews or Gentiles but Jews weren't supposed to charge interest from other Jews. Sometimes Jews would hire middle men, who were Gentile, to serve as their manager- thus working around the law. When the manager reduced the payments owed, he may have simply been forgiving his own cut of the interest. Or he may have been doing what the law of God commands, namely forgiving all the hidden interests in the contracts" (Rossing). All we really know about this manager is from two adjectives that have been assigned to him: "dishonest" and "clever." You know how adjectives quickly define people? Especially negative ones? You know how it may just be one thing someone has done or one of their characteristics, yet people become defined by those negative things. Why should one quality or thing someone has done discolor everything else about that person?! For example, I read online that the actress Anne Heche died this weekend at the age of 53 from injuries sustained from a car accident a week or so ago. But it wasn't just any car accident. Heche had been allegedly drinking heavily and was racing at top speeds down a residential road in Mar Vista, CA, destroying the home that her car

crashed into and eventually taking her life. I read some of the comments from people saying things like, “She got what she deserved.” “Why are you all remembering her for a kind and loving mom and person when she was destructive by drinking herself to death and putting others’ lives in danger.” As I read these messages, I wondered what it is about us that we do this thing where we say or think hurtful things about people- harshly judging them- even when we don’t know them because of something they have done. Maybe we need to dig more into the story? Gain a new perspective? It makes me think of how many different images one can see in a full moon (a woman, toad, or tree, etc.) or you know those pictures that are optical illusions that offer multiple interpretations- where two viewers can look at the same image and see two completely different things? “Although the dishonest manager does not repent (like the prodigal) or act virtuously (like Lazarus), he nonetheless does something with the rich man’s wealth that reverses the existing order of things. In Luke, reversals of status are at the heart of what happens when Jesus and the kingdom of God appear” (Lois Malcolm, workingpreacher.org). Therefore, today, I’d like to think about the actions of the clever manager and rather than condoning what he did, let’s explore what the disciples- what we, perhaps- can learn from him in today’s story.

This middle man had to manage this rich man’s property (whatever it was) and then report to him while also dealing with the customers and clients, who could not easily pay their bills. Verse 4 spells out the manager’s goal after getting fired by his boss. He comes up with a plan

to see his former boss' clients one-by-one so that they will welcome him into their homes once the work gets out that he is unemployed and broke. Sounds like selfish motives to me. So why is the manager clever? "Even though he is still a sinner who is looking out for his own interests, he models behavior he disciples can emulate. Instead of simply being a victim of circumstance, he transforms a bad situation into one that benefits him **and others**. By reducing other people's debts, he creates a new set of relationships based not on the vertical relationship between lenders and debtors (rooted in monetary exchange) but on something more like the reciprocal and egalitarian relationships of friends" (Malcolm). He also makes his boss look good in the eyes of the clients. Whatever the outcome, he has created good relations with a variety of people. "It is his resourcefulness and his realization that friends are more important than money that finally commends the manager to the consideration of the disciples. If even a dishonest manager realizes that relationships are more important than money, how much more should the children of light realize that 'true riches' have to do with relationships rather than wealth or possessions" Mary Schertz, *The Christian Century*, 2007). Who knew? Cleverness is relational and sitting around and judging is not?! The manager doesn't just sit there; he does something! When he realizes he's in trouble, he jumps into action. He doesn't wait around, wallowing in his despair. He comes up with a third way- doors #1 and #2 were closed, so he went to door #3. "Perhaps it's this sense of urgency, of single-mindedness, of creative possibility and cleverness that wins the manager such high praise from his employer. The manager harbors no illusions; he knows himself well. He knows he's

‘not strong enough to dig,’ and he knows he’s ‘too ashamed to beg,’ so he focuses instead on redeeming what he can about the situation he finds himself in” (Thomas).

Jesus puts it this way: “People who belong to this world are more clever in dealing with their peers than people who belong to the light” (v. 8b). People who belong to the light are more than likely Jesus’ disciples and people who belong to this world, by contrast, are “cunning and calculating and imaginative, willing to think outside the box, make a deal, help life move along. They know very well that the world doesn’t work by rules or bottom lines, or by organizational charts. It operates rather by connections and relationships and human realities that do not fit into such clear boxes (Walter Brueggemann, Vol. 3 *Collected Sermons*). Perhaps Jesus is calling his disciples to become as savvy to the ways of the kingdom as other people are street smart in the ways of the world. What if we took the reckless creativity and single minded purpose displayed by the manager and use that as an impetus for being more creatively reckless and single minded in our faith? What would our world look like? I wonder if this means we can do a better job, as children of the light, engaging the crises, issues, injustices, losses, and failures facing our world right now. “Where in our individual and communal lives are we waiting around instead of hitting the streets, the nations? In what areas of present-day life have we lost cultural relevance as Christians? If the manager in Jesus’ story can hustle so hard for his own survival, how much more might we contend on behalf of a

world God loves” (Thomas)? Sounds like we have some hustling to do in Jesus’ name, people of the light! Amen.