

Street Smarts
from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Reading: Luke 16:1-13

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This parable is enough to make anyone's attempt at interpretation seem less than adequate.

If there is one thing the commentaries agree on regarding this parable of the "shrewd manager" it is that we do not know for sure what to make of it. Is it a parable about the Kingdom of God? Yes, but aren't they all? Is it a parable about greed, about the temptation to make money an idol, an object of our worship? Yes, but it is not alone in that. Much of the Gospel material is about that very subject. The message, especially in the closing verses Luke seems to have added just to cover all the bases, is: you cannot serve God *and* wealth. You must decide which one you will hold as an object of your worship. After being delivered from the clutches of Pharaoh in Egypt the Israelites

had forgotten the deliverer.¹ That pattern had continued into Luke's day.

We know that Luke is fascinated with Jesus' use of parables. Jesus thought and spoke in parables and taught in parables throughout his adult life. He was a natural at it. He was like a person today who has the imagination to use analogies to convey a truth. He was like a mystery writer who knows how to keep us guessing to the end of the story. And, like the mystery, even when you have finished reading it, you still have questions you want to discuss with someone who has also read it.

It is this quality of parables to keep us asking questions that seems to appeal to Jesus. He wants the gospel's iconoclastic, counter-cultural dimension to figure large in our minds and force us to look again at the popular perspective, the comfortable position with God's expectations we have arranged for ourselves. Jesus wants these parables to get under our skin and to keep working in our minds so that we are kept off-balance enough that we never get smug, thinking we know all there is to know of God's truth.

And so, to this parable of "the clever steward", "the shrewd manager" who is commended, it would appear, for being less

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 1985) p.4-11.

than honest. Before we have even attempted to figure out what Jesus is about with this story we have a flag on the field for a moral foul: the manager is dishonest. Why should we declare that he has advanced our understanding toward the goal: figuring out our role in the mystery called the Kingdom of God?

I have come to the conclusion that most of our initial interpretations of the parables are probably wrong. If you will accept that possibility for the moment, you will, in my view, and that of most scholars, take a big step toward successfully solving at least some of the mystery of the parable. This is not like a game of “Clue” in which you can say, with certainty after initial investigation, “the butler did it, with a candlestick, in the library.” Our parable’s mystery is more complex than that and the first twist it presents to us is a violation of all our expectations. We *expect* this manager to get in trouble and to have his hand slapped for his dealing under the table with the people who owe him money. But instead, he is commended by his employer for his cleverness. By just telling the story, Jesus appears to approve of the steward’s action.

At this juncture we usually hear the preacher/interpreter say something like the following: “So, you see, Jesus seems to be commending the manager’s street smarts, his ability to get along, his shrewdness in figuring out a way to survive when he is without job security.

You will sometimes even hear a parallel idea offered here to the effect that as we move from getting our sense of security

from having a job and income we often discover the security in our relationships with others and with God. So, we could say, when he loses his job he learns what it is to be dependent on others and, by extension, on God.

This is a fair effort at interpreting the parable. But it is bound to make us ask, “Is that all there is to figuring out this mysterious saying? Are we just to be clever as men and women of the world in order to make sure we survive?” The answer to that question, as you might expect, is “no, there is still more to uncover here.”

Next comes the part that most of us would rather not have to consider. It is the thought, advanced in verse 9, that we really have **no security** we can bank on in this world so start figuring out a way to get along in the world while putting your trust in God. This is where the parable starts to move from intriguing tale to meddling message. More concretely than ever, the parable tells us that our worldly stability is temporary at best. Rather than living in “houses” we live in “tents.” The original language actually uses those words.² It has a kind of “wandering pilgrim” feel to it rather than a settled, establishmentarian, “who needs faith in God” feel. We don’t initially resonate toward this image. It sounds too much like the

² Scott Bader-Saye, *Feasting On the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010) p. 94.

traveling gypsy idea, the wanderer with no place to call home, the explorer of new frontier whose only reward is the reward of discovery.

I have to admit there is a certain attraction to this image. Consider the possibilities: with no job one is essentially accountable to no one but family... and the government. With no home one is free of the obligation of a mortgage and maintenance on a home. With the beckoning frontier ahead one can make like Lewis and Clark and their *Corps of Discovery*, energized by the opening of new horizons, new relationships, and new skills for survival. It is, at least for awhile, a rewarding way to live.

It isn't until the quest is over and these heroic figures return to a routine job considered to be secure that many of them begin to lose the edge they had found in the pilgrim life. Some offering of the world usually defeats them. It may be celebrity, arrogance, the worship of money and power, various addictions, boredom, etc. One begins to think that, at least in their case, it would have been better if the life of discovery while living in "tents" could have gone on indefinitely. The security of "house" and "traditional job" hasn't helped them much. They lived for discovery. Being settled is a slow death.

Here, then, is our little parable mystery, causing us to wonder if our lives are missing an important dimension: the sense of knowing our dependence on the security that God alone can provide? If the parable has even caused us to ask the

question it has probably done what Jesus or, at least, Luke intended. And when you put just that idea into the context our culture and our lifestyles and our values it is huge. It is huge because it invites us to consider where we place our trust. Is it in God or is it in material goods? How do we reconcile our interest in our possessions, our portfolios, our “stuff”, with our interest, our devotion to God?

Several writers, Robert Farrar Capon among them, have reminded us lately that God is not against “stuff”. God made “stuff” for six full days, according to the Genesis story. In the mythology of the tale we find that God was so tired from making the earth and the flora and fauna, man and woman and all the other things of the earth that God had to take a rest on the seventh day. The creation account celebrates “stuff”, and reminds us that we have been saddled with managing it. We are given to understand that we are the stewards of the earth and all its stuff. The question that comes to mind soon enough is “what shall we do with what we have been given and how shall we manage it?”

In other words, it isn't having the goods that is the problem, it's how does having these goods, this “wealth of material”, rate in our lives? Is it a means to an end (shrewd investment planning) or, is it an end in itself (an idol)?

In a timely essay published last summer in the *Christian Century*, Michael Lindvall of the Brick Church in Manhattan, argues for viewing *the incarnation* as the *definitive sign* that

God wants to be present in the midst of our material culture where we are surrounded by stuff.³ In other words, the incarnation presents the “both-and” existence that is ours to live with and embrace. God wants to be present with us when we are acquiring more and more stuff, just as God wants to be with us when we are down and out and out of a job, living in tents, wandering like pilgrims. Here is Michael Lindvall’s argument:

“The real soul danger is not exactly in liking things too much, nor in owning them, nor in caring for them well. In fact, there can be great virtue in such a caring relationship with physical things.

“The soul danger lies in the insatiable longing to acquire new things one after another, more and more things, as if the getting of them somehow proves our worth in comparison with others, as if the having of them can fill the emptiness. It’s this insatiable drive to acquire stuff rather than the stuff itself that’s the problem.

“The attempt to stuff more and more stuff into that unfilled place in our souls that only God can fill becomes, of course, idolatry—making what God made into god. The problem is not that this is a material world...God made it that way, and as God

³ Michael Lindvall, Living in a Material World, The Christian Century, July 13, 2010, pp. 11-12.

said repeatedly, (after each day of creation) it is good, in fact very good. In Jesus Christ, God has definitely entered into that very good materiality to claim it, bless it and transform it.”⁴

Into our material world, the one we call our home, God has come in Jesus Christ to claim and to expect our devotion. This God, alone, can give us the fulfillment we desire!

Thanks be to God.

⁴ Ibid.