

How's that again, Jesus?

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Luke 16:1-13

Jesus was on the road to Jerusalem. Day by day, his destiny was looming. Along the way, he confronted confusion and resistance. Along the way, he taught and healed. Along the way, he told stories — about lost sheep, lost coins, and lost sons.

[Jesus] also told his disciples: “There was a rich person who had a property manager. And people brought accusations against him to the rich person, that he was mishandling the rich person’s property. So he called to [the manager] and said, ‘What’s this I hear about you? Hand over your records! You can’t be in charge any longer.’

“The manager said to himself, ‘What am I going to do? My master’s taking away my position. I’m not strong enough to dig . . . I’m ashamed to beg . . . I know what I’ll do so that, when I’m removed from my position, people will welcome me into their homes.’ And he summoned every single person who was in debt to his master.

“He said to the first one, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘One hundred batous of olive oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your statement . . . have a seat . . . quickly . . . write “fifty.”’ He said to another person, ‘How much do you owe?’ He said, ‘One hundred korous of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your statement, and write “eighty.”’

“The master praised the dishonest manager for acting shrewdly, because the children of this age are more shrewd with their own kind than the children of light are. I tell you, make friends for yourselves using dishonest wealth, so that, when it gives out, they will welcome you into eternal dwellings.

“Someone who’s trustworthy with a little is trustworthy with a lot. And someone who’s dishonest with a little is dishonest with a lot. So then, if you haven’t been trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will entrust real wealth to you? And if you haven’t been trustworthy with what belongs to someone else, who will give you something of your own?

“No servant can serve two masters. Either the servant will hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and also wealth.”

Sermon

Today’s Gospel reading is a head-scratcher. Nobody is sure what to make of the parable and of Jesus’ comments that come after the parable. A whole series of approaches have been suggested. Some are straightforward — as straightforward as you can get with this parable. Some go at it sideways. And still others, I suppose you could say, turn things inside-out.

All this uncertainty is at once comforting and unsettling. It’s comforting, for instance, to a preacher who is having a hard time wrapping her mind and her heart around today’s text. It’s good for her to know that she’s not alone. But the uncertainty is unsettling to all of us. We readily admit the fuzziness of our understanding of this parable. But what makes us think we have a better handle on the rest of Jesus’ parables? And what makes us think we have a better grip on Jesus, our rabbi, our teacher?

But it’s not as hopeless as that makes it sound. Much of the gospel really is clearer than today’s text. And even today’s text has its bright and clear spots, clear enough to provide some light in the darkness, especially the darkness conjured up by the love of money.

So let me sketch out the story Jesus tells. First, the characters. There's a rich person. He's a member of the propertied class. He has assets, assets enough to lend out to others. Assets enough to keep them afloat financially, to keep them working, to keep them making payments to him. The rich person in Jesus' story is sort of a first century equivalent of the payday lending centers that have flourished across the state of Ohio these last ten years, making their money by keeping people in perpetual debt.

Then there's the property manager. The rich person has no direct contact with his debtors. He hires that work out, he outsources it to a property manager, who is perhaps a direct employee of the rich person, perhaps someone kept on retainer, perhaps a contract employee. In any case, the property manager, as the name implies, manages someone else's property. So there are two salient features to his position. First, it's a position of trust. And, second, the property manager's own assets are not at risk.

Last, there are the debtors, a long line of them, though only two are mentioned specifically.

So much for the characters. Here's what happens in the story. The property manager is about to lose his position. He had been mishandling the rich person's property. It's not clear how. Perhaps he was skimming more than the agreed-upon percentage from the payments the debtors were making. Perhaps. Whatever he had been doing, it had become obvious enough for people to notice and to make accusations.

The rich person wasted no time. He told the manager to hand over his financial records and to clean out his desk. Then he put on an ill-fitting toupee and said, "You're fired!" He dared the property manager to trump that. Which, of course, he did on his way out the door. In his final official act, the property manager cooked the books. And he invited all his boss's debtors to have a taste. It was a simple matter of adjusting the ledger. And suddenly the long line of debtors was less indebted, except for the debt of gratitude they now owed to the property manager.

Now, the rich person was not in the dark when it came to his business. That's not how you get rich. He saw what was going on — and he smiled! He couldn't help it. He recognized something of himself, I'm sure, in the shrewd, dishonest ex-property manager.

That's what happens in the story. It's pretty straightforward.

But what Jesus does with the story — that's the challenge. First, Jesus acknowledges the conniving and the wheeling and dealing that accompany high finance (and not-so-high finance!). There's a shrewdness among those who are caught up in the world and its ways, a shrewdness that's alien to those who are caught up in the kingdom of God. Jesus says, "The children of this age are more shrewd with their own kind than the children of light are." So Jesus acknowledges the wheeling and dealing that accompany financial transactions. And then, Jesus commends wheeling and dealing as a way to secure your place in eternity. So it seems. He says, "Make friends for yourselves using dishonest wealth, so that, when it gives out, they will welcome you into eternal dwellings."

Can it be? Can Jesus really be commending slick transactions? Can Jesus really be recommending clever clauses in contracts? Can he really mean that the loyalty you buy now will translate into a comfortable eternity? I don't think so. I think Jesus is being sarcastic.

"Go ahead!" he says. "Go ahead, be a wheeler and dealer. Go ahead, make friends and influence people. Go ahead, climb to the top of the corporate ladder. Do you really think those people — people you've bought and paid for, people you've paid off — do you really think those people are the ones who will welcome you into eternity?"

Jesus is being sarcastic. And I think his next remarks confirm this. First, Jesus puts trustworthiness and dishonesty in opposition. And the property manager, he's clearly on the dishonest side of the ledger. Then Jesus says two things that pull the rug out from underneath that dishonest property manager. He says, "If you're not honest with what counts for wealth in this world" — that's the property manager — "then don't expect to have real wealth" — something of eternal worth — "entrusted to you." After that

he says, “If you’re not honest with someone else’s property” — again, that’s the property manager, dealing with the rich person’s property — “then don’t expect to get some possession of your own” — presumably, life and blessing in eternity.

So, while the rich person praises the property manager, who has, in effect, learned from his master, from the rich man himself, Jesus himself does not commend the property manager. He is not to be imitated!

Jesus concludes by saying that wealth and property and possessions and money add up to a dangerous distraction from God. They compete for our loyalty, for our devotion, for our love. And they have a love for us. (When the Apostle Paul refers to the love of money, it’s not merely a reference to our love for money, but also to money’s love for us.) Wealth and property and possessions and money desire us. They want to possess us. But Jesus says, “No! No, no, a thousand times no!” He says, “You cannot serve God and also wealth.”

Around 1980, Bob Dylan sang, “You gotta serve somebody.” That’s true. You’ve got to serve somebody. If not God, then perhaps the devil, or perhaps the flag, or perhaps your house and your car and your wardrobe and your guitar collection, or perhaps your career, or perhaps your kids and their success, or perhaps your church, or perhaps your reflection in the mirror, or perhaps your library and the great minds that meet there, or perhaps some hoped-for comfort and guaranteed security. You’ve got to serve somebody. If not God, then perhaps wealth and what it can give you.

But you can’t serve God and also . . . wealth. You can’t serve God and also . . . property. You can’t serve God and also . . . cash on hand. Jesus said that, and he said it clearly. Don’t let wealth and its partners love you away from that. And they do love you. And they will love you. They will make you laugh. They will make you smile. They will make you sigh with contentment. Wealth and its partners will give you goals to strive for, goals to reach with satisfaction. And if you let them — don’t ever let them!!!! — if you let them, wealth and its partners will love you away from God.