



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
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## *Parables and Living*

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SCRIPTURE: Luke 16:1-9

16Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property.’<sup>2</sup> So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’<sup>3</sup> Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.’<sup>4</sup> I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’<sup>5</sup> So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’<sup>6</sup> He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’<sup>7</sup> Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’<sup>8</sup> And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.<sup>9</sup> And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

SERMON The Rev. Brent Damrow

So, pastors – we have an interesting love/hate relationship with parables, truth be told. Oh, give us one like the Prodigal Son, and give us children to talk to, and we will love to spend time talking about God’s great forgiving love poured out no matter what. Especially if it means we don’t have to get to the end of that parable, if you remember, where the older brother refuses to come into the party. If you put us in a Bible study or if you put us among other clergy, we will geek out over parables. Because there are no easy answers, and we will spend time debating what each little word means, looking them up in Greek and Hebrew, and having all sorts of fun with them, until the time just clicks on by, and someone in the Bible study finally says, ‘Uh, pastor, it’s time to go.’

But when we have to preach about parables, it gets a bit trickier, because there is an expectation in our preaching that we wrap something up for you, that we give you something to think about, that we tell you, in some ways teach you about what are in these Scriptures, and what they mean for your everyday life. And there is a temptation for pastors like me to want to tie it up way too neatly, to tell you exactly what this means, and why it matters. But the whole definition of parable is that they defy easy answer or explication, that they are

designed to meet us in our time and in our location and unfold gradually piece by piece.

And then you get to this parable this morning? Well, it evokes a story from one pastor to another. You see, there was this brand new associate pastor, eager to take on his role at this great big church. And the Sunday finally came around when this person got to preach, and he went to his mentor, and he said to her, "This is the parable that I want to preach on. It is the gospel, after all, and we should be preaching the gospel, and so since this is assigned for the lectionary, I'm going to preach on this one today." And she looked at him and she said, "Are you sure? Because if you do you might end up just like that dishonest manager, out of a job."

And in case you think that's just folklore, we could go back to Augustine, one of the church fathers, the pillars of how we understand faith. You know what he said about this parable? He said, "I can't believe that those words actually came out of the mouth of Jesus. They are so scandalous." Luther said that this parable only reveals to us that we are only justified by faith, not by anything that we do. And there are many early apologetics that called this particular parable an embarrassment to the Christian community. In it, you hear Jesus commending the actions of the dishonest manager, telling us to behave the same way. And don't you just want to shut the book and go on to the next chapter?

Here's the thing, though. What we need to remember is that this parable only appears in Luke. There is another parable that only appears in Luke, too. It is the story I talked to the children about, The Prodigal Son. Did you know, The Prodigal Son ends and this parable begins. They are joined together. And what that leads me to believe is that Luke wants us to put them in dialogue with each other. Not just simply because geographically they occupy space in the same area. But thematically, grammatically and linguistically, they share much in common.

Take, the dishonest manager. Do you remember what he was accused of doing by his boss? Squandering. Does that word sound familiar at all? It is exactly what the prodigal son did. They both squandered. And if I was preaching from notes, I'd tell you the Greek word, but what you need to know is the Greek word that appears in both cases is the same word. And it has a connotation in the ancient times in which it was written, not as notoriously nefarious or negligent, but rather the idea of careless, the idea of frivolous. This wealth that was entrusted to these two people was handled carelessly, without regard for the true depth of their worth. So we are joined in these parables by two people who squandered.

But we are also joined in this parable by two people who were the masters. You need to know in this parable of the prodigal son, it would have been a great shame to the father that the son asked for this money and went away. It's the equivalent of saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead." It's the equivalent of saying, "I'm not trusting our customs. I'm going off to live in a foreign land." The father would have been embarrassed in the whole community by what his son did. In this case, does the father know the son squandered all the money? I think if you suddenly saw your son, who was well dressed when he left, who was plump with all the good food he had eaten, coming back in rags, disheveled, and skinny as a rail, one might imagine pretty accurately that all the money was gone. Do you know what Luke tells us that he did? He hiked up his skirts, because men would have worn long robes. He would have hiked up his skirts, and he ran to his son, with everyone watching. It would have been a humiliating moment for most people, but not for this master, because the most important thing was welcoming his son, bringing him back into the home.

Let's put him in dialogue with the master in this parable. If you listened carefully to Josh's reading this morning, you'll notice that an account came to the master. Rumor circulated. Someone told him, "Hey, this employee of yours is squandering your money." And what did the master do? He calls him in. He says, "Hey, I heard this rumor that you're squandering my money. You're done. You're out." There is nothing in this parable that suggests that there's any evidence that actually pointed to this squandering really happening. Instead of someone willing to forgive, is someone who is judging and saying, "You are out, and you are gone." So I wonder when we start looking at this parable, if instead of being called The Dishonest Manager, it should instead be called The Unforgiving Master. What would happen if we looked at this second parable, not through the lens of what the manager did, but also through the lens of what the master did.

As I told the children this morning, Jesus didn't tell these parables just simply to look cool. He didn't tell them as intellectual word games. He told them to that the people would learn a whole new way of living. He meant for this story to shape how people lived. I don't know what you heard in this story, but here's what I heard. The master commended the manager for being dishonest, and told him to keep it up. That doesn't sound like anything Jesus would ever say, now does it? And yet, and yet, this is a parable that we are supposed to take to heart.

And so, where do we start? Before we talk about the manager, I want to say one more thing about the master. It seems to me that Luke told these stories in this order for an important reason. It is that sometimes we are used to thinking about God in the way this second master is presented in this parable, as someone up there in some far off place who's keeping an account of what we do and how we spend our time, and how we steward our resources, just waiting for us to trip up. The kind of God who is a scorekeeper, because that is what the second master is. But Luke wants us to remember that the God in heaven is the one who simply waits for us to come home, who is not keeping score but rather keeping track of who is part of this joyful celebration. And so the first thing we need to remember is sometimes we turn this master in this parable, who many people actually claim is God. I, instead, think that we can look at this master as who we create God to be, and who the masters of the world are – those who demand of us to always be on guard, and to give and to give and to give. But as for me, this second one is the one I think we're in danger of turning God into, the one who keeps score and the one who kicks out. Rather, God is the one who comes and finds us under our blankets when we are scared, putting his hand on our shoulder and saying, "It will be okay."

So that brings us to this dishonest manager. What do we do with him? There is a real question, friends, about how we are called to live in the world. Remember Jesus said, "You are to live in the world but not of it." We come in this place and we talk about things like sharing peace. We share our vulnerable secrets with one another, we give hugs, we live in the way where beauty works. And then, we've got to go out there. And I think the age-old question for people of faith is: How do we take what's in here and send it out there? And I think that there is a danger sometimes in being honest and authentic people out in the world, that the world will indeed take advantage of us. I remember Jesus said turn the other cheek, so I think that's okay. But I think Jesus is also preparing those who will follow him by saying, "Be in that world. Repair that world. Heal that world. Be part of that world." And part of how you have to do it is by actually interacting with the world.

Karl Rahner, famous Catholic theologian, says that it is impossible for us to participate in the current economy without hurting someone. Whatever we buy has an impact that we don't know, either on the person who made it, on the environment itself, that we participate in a system in which we unfortunately are part of hurting the world. But Rahner doesn't say that to give up, but rather to make us more intentional about who we are and how we go about living.

So what does this manager do? I'm going to tell you one really fascinating interpretation of it. It's very generous, it's very nice. And so if you need something to hold onto, you can. And that is this, that the manager likely would have gotten a commission for everything that he collected. So the money that he was taking off of all these bills was simply his commission. He wasn't really stealing from the master, he wasn't really cutting these debts. He was just being nice and giving them back the commission he would have gotten. Sounds all well and good, and I actually like it a lot, and on tougher days that's the one I'm going with. But the reality is he had to make choices about what he did.

And I like another interpretation better. What did he do to all those debts? Reduce or forgive. There's a beautiful article written about this very parable which says that the heart of this whole thing is simply forgiveness. He did not have the authority to forgive these things, and he was doing it at someone else's expense. But the person who wrote this says when you start with forgiveness, only good can follow. This writer imagines that the people who had their debts reduced, certainly they benefited. Certainly the manager who reduced the debts, he suddenly had a place to live. And even in this parable the wealthy master benefited, because suddenly these people saw him in a new way.

This is a tough parable, because it asks the tough question about what it means to live in the world, what it means to exist as people of faith and make tough choices out in the world, so we don't simply get swept away, and yet somehow hold on to the integrity of our faith. I would be an absolute fool to try to tell you exactly how that works. But instead I need to challenge you that this is the kind of thinking that we need to do each and every day when we are out there. To participate in this world always with an idea of how we use these resources for the betterment of the world.

In this passage, the resources are called mammon. It is the idea not just of money, but it is the idea of putting your faith or trust in something, putting your faith or trust in money. In the next line, Jesus will say you cannot serve both God and wealth. So what I think is at stake here is how do we each use our choices, our actions, our abilities to engage in forgiveness, and to use the resources that we have out there in this world to make a real difference while it counts.

I would love to hear how you struggle with this in the weeks to come. And I would love to share with you how I do as well. So let this not be the end of the sermon. Let this not be the end of the parable. But rather, like all parables, let this sermon go on and on and on, until we teach each other exactly how to do this hard work. Amen?



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*