

The Hardest Parable – Sermon
September 23, 2007
Amos 8:4-7, Luke 16:1-13
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This morning's parable about the dishonest manager is to me the most baffling of all of Jesus' parables. It is almost impossible to make logical sense of it. I thought about focusing on the first reading – Amos' strong and direct warning about cheating the poor – perhaps a sermon on sub-prime mortgage lending, or the various ways in which our society is unjust to the poor. I thought about dismissing the gospel, as I did in a sermon a couple of weeks ago by recommending that we ignore Jesus' words in that reading about hating the people and the life we love as the cost of discipleship. But I can't do that again. I feel we must grapple with this most difficult parable. I think it's part of my job to wrestle with such passages and try to lead us into the mystery and questions they pose.

This parable certainly does raise questions, and I'll say up front that I've come up with no adequate answers. We have the central character – the dishonest steward, or manager. His job, apparently, is that of a collection agent. He goes around to his boss's debtors and collects what they owe and supposedly gives it to the owner. We are not told whether he gets, or takes, a commission. But the parable begins with the master telling him he has learned that the steward has been squandering his property. He demands an accounting, after which the steward will be fired.

So now the man faces a crisis – loss of job and income. He recognizes that he is not fit to work in the fields and too proud to beg, so he basically decides to ingratiate himself to the debtors by going around and telling each one he can reduce the amount of his debt, one by half, another by 20% and so forth.

So far, we follow the story. This guy is looking out for himself, trying to gain some friends by adjusting their debts downward, hoping for their support when he is out of a job. But then comes this shocking news – the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly! The master goes on to say enigmatically that the children of this age are more shrewd than the children of light. After this comes a collection of sayings about faithfulness and dishonesty with wealth, ending with the familiar adage that a slave can't serve two masters – you can't serve God and wealth. Most Biblical scholars think the parable ends with the master's commendation and that the other sayings are moral bits and pieces collected by Luke and added in here – not originally part of Jesus' telling of the parable. I'll put them aside and stick to the parable – it presents enough problems on its own.

This story seems to be one in which dishonesty is rewarded. It flies in the face of what we think of as moral, but we're not even sure about that. What is Jesus saying? Why is the steward commended for his shrewdness? There are several possibilities.

Is he a bad guy who cheats his master, then cheats him again by lowering the debts to gain favor from the debtors? Or is he a bad guy who kind of reforms? Was he charging exorbitant commissions until the accounting is demanded, and then he goes around and subtracts his commissions from the bills - thus perhaps no longer cheating the master and giving up his own dishonest profits. Is that why he is commended? Or is it because by lowering the debts it becomes more likely that the master will receive at least some, if not all of what is owed him?

One way or another, it seems a very worldly story - using whatever you can to get by - in this case, shrewdness and continued financial manipulation. One commentator even suggests that it's a story about total commitment - doing whatever it takes to get through a crisis and carve out a new future! This would imply an "end justifies the means" take on the story - again, something we're conditioned to reject. It's not right to do sinful things to get to a good outcome - especially if the outcome is your own selfish gain - is it?

If not the bad guy, then how possibly can this dishonest cheater be the hero of Jesus' story? We can't get around the first part of vs. 8, "And the master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly" and then vs. 9, which may or may not be part of the parable but which definitely underscores our confusion, "...make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes". Who are they? What eternal homes?

I found some clues in a book by Robert Farrar Capon, a writer Harrison and I both find intriguing. Capon is a retired Episcopal priest and a witty, provocative and prolific author. His book, The Parables of Grace, really helped me in thinking about this parable.

Capon reads it as a parable of radical forgiveness and new life out of death. He sees the steward as a complete, sinful loser who breaks all the rules and ends up being praised and accepted by the master anyway. He sees the master as changing from a rigid owner who demanded every last cent to one who was willing to accept partial payments and appreciate the actions of the steward as those of a desperate man using the only thing he knows to provide at least the possibility of a fresh start. Capon sees the debtors as people who gladly

dealt with the steward because of his willingness to cook the books. They saw him as one of them. He could bail them out of their debts or at least reduce them by shrewdness. The upright, exacting master would never do that.

From here, Capon goes on to suggest that the unjust steward is actually a Christ figure – someone who dies and rises, someone who raises others through his own death, someone who breaks the rules and gets punished first, but then rewarded, raised from death and disgrace. Go there if you like – I have a hard time with it.

I do wonder if maybe the story of a person who just goes wrong and then perhaps compounds that with further dishonesty, hoping for acceptance anyway, can engage us in another way. Maybe this parable invites us to imagine that our life with God isn't a matter of gold stars for good behavior. Imagine that even at our worst, we are forgiven. Even when we are corrupt, we are not condemned. Maybe making friends by means of dishonesty suggest something about the way sin, rather than righteousness, is the only way we really come to understand that we need God. As long as we're doing everything right, we don't need God; we don't need saving. It is only in the recognition and facing of our flaws and failures that we get what saving is all about – a power of unconditional love and forgiveness. Our own efforts to be perfect will never succeed; they will never save us.

Perhaps the steward's shrewdness was his friend because it brought him to the realization that he had hit bottom and needed help, and he at least reached for it. And if there's any analogy here – the master reached back in commending him.

I'm left unsure – grasped by this parable in ways that never happen with the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan with their clearer messages. What is Jesus telling us in this odd story, and what is Luke telling us? About shrewdness, about sin, about wealth, about Jesus himself? Perhaps the parable is best used as a Christian teaching in the following way – recommended by Father Capon in the introduction to his book:

“Christian education is not the communication of correct views about what the various works and words of Jesus might *mean*; rather it is the stocking of the imagination with the icons of those works and words themselves. It is most successfully accomplished, therefore, not by catechisms that purport to produce understanding but by stories that hang the icons, understood or not, on the walls of the mind. We do not include the parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, because we understand it nor do we omit the parable of the (Dishonest) Steward because we can't make head or tail of it. Rather, we commit both to the

Christian memory because that's the way Jesus seems to want the inside of his believers' heads decorated. Indeed, the only really mischievous thing any one can do with the Gospel is insist on hanging only the picture he happens to like. That's where heresy really is: picking and choosing, on the basis of *my* interpretations, between the icons provided to me. Orthodoxy, if it's understood correctly, is simply the constant displaying of the entire collection."

That's about the best I can do with this challenging parable. May it stir our hearts and minds nonetheless. Amen.