



“One Extraordinarily Weird Story”

Text: Luke 16:1-13

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

September 22, 2013

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Every now and then, you come across a Biblical passage that, on first reading, makes absolutely no sense. Such is the case with this morning’s parable from Luke. It is one extraordinarily weird story. Rudolph Bultmann, the great 20th century theologian and New Testament authority, called our parable for the morning “The problem child of parable exegesis.” Never did Bultmann speak such truth in six words.

Many of us hear this parable and are offended by it. There seems to be two reasons for our offense.

First, we are a little put off that Jesus could find anything commendable in a person who acts in such a dishonest way. We are offended that the central character in the parable is not totally on the up-and-up. We hear of people who play fast-and-loose with the books – people who practice financial malpractice – and we just don’t care for those folks. Our parable’s steward is one such person and we don’t like him. That’s first.

Second, we aren’t particularly fond of words like “shrewd” and “clever” to describe people who are part of the Kingdom of God. “Shrewd” and “clever” are words that have come to be connected to self-serving behaviors of a negative sort. We typically would not use “shrewd” as an adjective for “saint.” Conniving and devious behaviors are not what we would call good examples of discipleship.

So, this extraordinarily weird story poses a couple of problems from the get-go. What is Jesus trying to tell us in this story? Why didn’t someone edit this a bit more thoroughly along the way? What are we to make of the story?

Maybe the first thing we need to say is that parables are not always complete and don't always have a single, focused message. My hunch is that there is a lot going on in this parable and a good bit of it is lost to us, simply because we are not 1st century Palestinian Jews, living in a land occupied by foreign oppressors. We're a bit removed from the situation that first called this parable home.

So, let's consider where we find this parable. In Luke's gospel, this parable is placed between the parable of the Prodigal Son and the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Like the prodigal in the preceding story, our dishonest manager has "squandered" what was entrusted to him. And, like the story that follows, this parable begins with the phrase, "There was a rich man."

Although the dishonest steward does not repent (like the prodigal) or act virtuously (like Lazarus), he uses the rich man's wealth to reverse 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. The proud are "scattered" (which is the same word for "squandered"), the powerful are brought down, the lowly lifted, the hungry are filled, and the rich are sent away empty.

Now, as crazy as it sounds, could it be that the steward is being commended for using his head? The owner stood to lose everything that was due to him because of the steward's mismanagement and misuse of the resources entrusted to him. But, seeing that he was about to be fired, he went to his master's creditors and offered them discounts if they paid right there and then. Instead of losing everything, the steward managed to get his master something of what was owed to him. And for that marketing and managing move, the steward was commended by his master.

It could also be that the steward was offering the creditors a discount in order to curry their favor, so that when he was fired, he might have someone to turn to. After all, the master had said to the steward, "you cannot be my manager any longer." He had failed his employer. He had failed to meet any of the goals and objectives set before him. He had made a mess of the business which had been placed in his care and keeping. A fellow like that, with no prospects of a bright future, might want to have a few friends beholden to him when the axe fell.

As you can see, there's a lot going on in this parable. Who knows which turn we're supposed to take? The truth is that the story is multi-leveled with a multitude of meanings.

But, we need a sermon and something for you to take with you into your week, so let's see if we can't pull it together a little.

It is interesting to note that one of the words we don't like in the story – "shrewd" – has other possible translations. You could also translate the Greek word as "prudent," "wise," "astute," or "perceptive." We like those words better than "shrewd," don't we?

“And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.” And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted wisely – astutely – “perceptively.” Kind of puts the whole matter in a different light, doesn’t it?

The steward has something on the ball. The steward has his wits about him. This steward is on his toes. He is in tune with the situation and makes lemonade out of lemons.

All of a sudden, this fellow isn’t quite the jerk we pegged him to be. Whether we want to admit it or not, in the church, there exists what Fred Craddock calls an “anticerebral bias.” That is, we don’t think of thinking as a kingdom activity. We like that the Kingdom of God is filled with people who practice a blind, trusting naiveté. We imagine that the Kingdom of God will just break out, everything will be set right, and everybody will be happy.

That couldn’t be further from the truth. The Kingdom of God is dependent on people using their heads, their hearts, their hands, their time, and – as the parable leads us to understand – our treasure. In order to be good and faithful disciples, we must be good and faithful stewards.

The Kingdom of God – and the expansion of God’s kingdom of love – is entrusted to those who are “shrewd,” “prudent,” “wise,” “astute,” and “perceptive.” The Kingdom of God – and the expansion of God’s kingdom of love – is entrusted to those who take stock of what they have and how it can be used for God’s purposes. The Kingdom of God – and the expansion of God’s kingdom of love – is committed to those who are willing to take full advantage of the resources, technologies, methodologies, insights, studies – whatever is available, to expand the borders of God’s kingdom on earth.

The Reverend Dr. Fred Craddock puts it this way:

The life of a disciple is one of faithful attention to the frequent and familiar tasks of each day, however small and insignificant they may seem. The one faithful in today’s nickels and dimes is the one to be trusted with the big account, but it is easy to be indifferent toward small obligations while quite sincerely believing oneself fully trustworthy in major matters. The realism of these sayings is that life consists of a series of seemingly small opportunities. Most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More

likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a court commissioner, teach a children's class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor's cat.¹

Faithfulness is not always found in the grandiose and the extravagant gestures and situations of life. Faithfulness is quite often found in our response to the routine, the simple, and even the mundane, happenings of everyday living. Maybe that's what the parable is trying to tell us, even though it is still one extraordinarily weird story.

“Shrewd,” “prudent,” “wise,” “astute,” and “perceptive.” That's the kind of discipleship Jesus was commending to his audience then and it's the kind of discipleship Jesus is commending to those who would be his disciples now. Jesus calls us to faithfully use everything at our disposal for the Kingdom of God – the kingdom of love – the kingdom of peace – the kingdom of justice – the kingdom of righteousness.

And in order to do that, we need to restructure our priorities. Whatever we think is first in our lives must give way to God and the Kingdom of God being first in our lives. Whatever we think is ours must be given to the service of expanding God's Kingdom. Whatever talents we possess, they must be given over to the purpose of the Kingdom. Whatever wisdom we have is to be used for greater purpose than self-service and self-glorification.

Yes, it is one extraordinarily weird story. But the lesson couldn't be clearer: use your head...your heart...your hands...your gifts...your talents...your experience...your insights...your treasure...use it all to expand the borders of the Kingdom of God. And if we will, the prayer will be fulfilled: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Take whatever we have, O God, and use it for your Kingdom. The Kingdom that is both now and forevermore. Amen.

¹Luke, Fred B. Craddock, Interpretation Series, pp. 191-192



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