

19 September, 2010; Proper 20C
Jer 8:18-19:1; I Tim 2:1-7
Luke 16: 1-13

Rev. Deborah Meister

The parable of the dishonest manager, as it is called, is a loathsome story. It has troubled preachers and commentators for as long as it has existed -- probably because it makes so little sense. The rich man finds out that his business manager is corrupt and fires him, asking him to make a final accounting before he heads out the door. The manager, panicked about having no job, calls the rich man's debtors and reduces their bills. The rich man, figuring out what has happened, commends him for it -- even though he will be the poorer. This just isn't the way things work in any conceivable world. All things being equal, it's a good thing Jesus went into preaching rather than business!

From the very beginning, Jesus' disciples did not know what to make of it, and so they began to add "explanations" -- hoping to tame the story and make it less puzzling than it is. We hear three of them this morning, embedded within the text of Scripture itself, endings to the story which do not really fit. Now Jesus was not in the habit of explaining his stories; the whole point of telling parables was to force his disciples to wrestle with Christ's teachings in a flesh-and-blood way, working out the teaching of God in the interplay between the stories and the stuff of their own lives. So most scholars think that these endings were added by scribes at a later date; they are morals which have been incorporated into the text. First, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." Huh? Anyone understand that? Second, "if you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" This one makes more sense, but it directly contradicts both the first moral and the story. Third, "No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth." That one's all very well, and any number of stewardship sermons have been preached on it, but, what does it have to do with the parable?

These morals each make two mistakes: they try to tidy up a story which is deeply tangled at its core, and they try to bring God into the picture. You see, this parable is not about God, at least not directly. It's about people who are deliberately shutting God out. The manager is not trying to get into the eternal homes, or to serve the Lord, or to do a good deed; he is trying to save his sorry skin, by any means which come to hand. After years of dishonest work, he is not willing to try to play by clean rules. He says as much: "I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg." (Luke 16:3) His dirty reputation will preclude him from being hired into another business, and he will not try either manual labor or charity. Instead, he clings to his pride, and works one more fraud.

But is the rich man any better? Two of the endings to this story use the same phrase: "dishonest wealth." This could refer to the manager's final, fraudulent accounting, but it is possible that the rich man, too, is not on the up and up. The noted Biblical scholar Harold Attridge has suggested that the man was charging interest on his accounts. Not an unusual thing by our standards, but back then, it was a violation of the law of God. They called it usury and it was a sin. So perhaps, when the manager re-worked the accounts at the end, he was erasing the rich man's predatory behavior and restoring a just balance: moving him from being a loan shark charging 19% on a payday loan to being a fair and honest bank. That might explain why the rich man commends the manager: because he has figured out the one way to take revenge for which the rich man cannot haul him into court and demand payment. It's a clever reading, whether or

not it is true. But even if this is the case, the steward clearly keeps the law of God only as a by-product of his other aims; he is not trying to please God.

Instead, the story shows us an airless and lightless world in which people prey on one another and the entire system of commerce is corrupt. We know a bit about that world in our country these days, and many people in other countries know even more. There are places in which bribery is the order of the day, in which pay-to-play governs what happens in the legislature, in which businesses devise predatory lending devices to steal the wages of the poor, the work of their own hands, even the roofs over their heads. In lands such as these, even the earth and the water suffer, as toxic substances spill into the very land from which we draw our life, and the people cry out to a God who seems to be absent because so many of those in power have shut God out, or invoke his name merely as window-dressing, crying out: "Help, Lord." "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?...The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." (Jer 8:19-20, and libretto to Mendelssohn's *Elijah*)

I received a letter from a parishioner the other day; she is a woman who is trying to figure out how to live a just and moral life in complex and exploitative economic world. She asked, in part, "What do we do about the morass of social issues tangled up with our day to day living? I'm specifically thinking about unfair labor practices in the manufacture of our goods, conflict minerals in our electronics, and the profit from products we buy being invested in wars, injustice, and even random things like pornography. Where does our responsibility end? Does it end only when we don't know what's happening, which allows past generations freedom from culpability since they often just didn't know about child labor...? Or does it end when we're no longer directly doing the misdeed, as in I may have purchased a movie that profits a pornographer and he may use the royalty to fund his pornography business, but that money is no longer mine, it's his and the responsibility is 100% his whether I know it or not?" That woman is pointing us to a truth: that when we moved from a local economy to an international one, we lost the possibility of moral innocence. When I know the people who make the things I use and grow the food I eat, I can find out about their business and labor practices and choose to patronize people who are in line with my ethics. When the shirt I wear was sewn in China of thread spun in Honduras out of cotton grown in India, I no longer know what good or harm my money is doing in the world. We may have the best of intentions, but none of us has clean hands. We're back to the question of what we do with dishonest wealth.

When the dishonest manager acts to save his own skin, he does two things inadvertently: he gets down off his high horse and throws in his lot with all the other people who are just scraping to get by, and he performs an act of mercy. Neither of these acts is unambiguous in its context, but perhaps the scandal of this story is the scandal of the Gospel itself.

We like to think that when Jesus came to be born in a stable, he came to help those who were crying out to God, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" (Jer 18:22) We like to think he came to save shepherds who were watching their flocks by night; to save wise men who were seeking after the truth, no matter where their star lead them; to save peasants who were crushed under the heel of the Roman Empire; to save the outcast who had lost their place in society for no good reason; to save good people, righteous people, who could not figure out how to keep their hands clean in a corrupt world. And he did come to save those people -- but those were not the only people he came to help.

He also came to save the wicked, those who were not trying to do good, and they clustered around him: thieves, murderers, adulterers. People who were possessed by demons. Herod, who wanted to see Jesus perform a miracle. Zaccheus, who had practiced extortion when

he collected taxes. The CEOs of Bank of America, Enron, and BP. The polluters, the loan sharks, the grifters, the sweatshop owners. The torturers and the terrorists. The corporate fat-cats who bolster record profits by refusing to hire the unemployed. Jesus came to save people who *needed* to be saved: to be saved from the just judgment of God, and also to be saved from their own sorry selves. When the manager in the story cuts deals with the creditors, what is he doing but acknowledging his own complicity in the corruption of the world? What is he doing, if not taking flesh and blood and living among the lost of the earth, just as Jesus did? Oh, I am not saying he was Jesus -- he was not. The manager was a foul man. But Jesus calls us to see that we are all foul men and women, that we are all people who need the mercy of God: not because we are good and the world is not, but because we are enmeshed in evil even if we do not wish to be, because if God's justice and our injustice were put into a balance, not one of us would come out even. We *need* Christ's mercy.

And what the manager did to save his own skin was to show other people mercy. Oh, he did it with things which were not his to give; he did it with someone else's money. He was like a government agent who goes to a family facing foreclosure and offers to reduce their mortgage to a rate they can pay; he is giving away money which legitimately belongs to someone else's business, but still, the terms were unreasonable to start with, and the new rate might let someone stay in their home. Did he have the right to do it? *Quien sabe?* But did it help the homeowner? Absolutely!

My friends, the mercy we give one another is the mercy we have been given. When we share our clothing with the naked, our food with the hungry, we are not offering things which are morally clean; we are offering what we have, whatever its source. When we give our time to one another, when we share our skills, we are offering up what God has given us: the very moments of our lives are given us as gift, and we choose to share them with one another. When we share the Gospel with one another, when we go to one who is mourning and offer hope, or to one who is sick and pray for healing, we are sharing with one another the mercy we have been given -- not because we deserved that mercy, but because we did not. That's what grace means: it is given to those who do not deserve it, because they could never deserve it, because God was not willing that we should remain separated from God and from one another forever.

When Jesus came among us, he looked at what we owed God -- perfect fidelity and unblemished love -- and he marked the bill down. We owed God one hundred percent? Make it eighty! Make it fifty! There's a fire sale on the things of God today! Make the circle square! Make the sinners fit into the robes of the righteous. Let the lame, the blind, the halt, and the aged into the wedding feast. Throw wide the doors of the Kingdom, and let the people stream in.

And we, we who are trying to be good people, to lead upright and moral lives -- for all of us here are trying to be good people, to be kind people -- remember that you stand only by the mercy of God. When others come to you unable or unwilling to give you what they owe -- when your children act out, when your boss is unfair, when your spouse struggles with fidelity, when people choose lifestyles that make you uncomfortable -- do not withhold from others the mercy which you, yourself, have been given. So often, we practice, not grade inflation, but life inflation -- making ourselves out to be more than we are in order to impress others with our appearance of purity. So often, we cut our own bills down to size, and yet hold others accountable for the full reckoning. But that was not the way of Christ, who took upon himself the full cost of our shame so that we might live with hope.

The truth, my friends, is that we are all dishonest managers, giving less than our full selves every day of our lives. We do not meet one another with perfect attentiveness, even

though we know that each person we meet is a living image of God. We do not hear one another with perfect mercy, do not assume that even the most messed-up person we know may be trying his or her best. We do not sell all we have and give to the poor, even though Jesus commanded it. We do not honor our friendships or our marriages with perfect fidelity. We come to church, and our minds drift from God to the pressing business of our everyday lives (and then our stomachs rumble, and we think of lunch). We shirk prayer to go to baseball games, embrace the Yankees more fervently than the cross. We go through life shaving the bill, taking on too many things, spreading ourselves too thin to do any of them with our full strength, because each of them really and truly is worth doing. We sell out our greatest gifts trying to be all things to all people, even though only Christ can do that.

But in Christ, we have forgiveness. In Christ, we have understanding. In Christ, we can trust that, no matter what kind of mess we make in our efforts to do what is good in our eyes, we are preceded by the mercy of God and followed by the love of God and given strength, if we ask it, to be whole. For Christ is the most careless accountant of them all. We are not asked to be morally perfect. We are asked to accept the mercy of God, and to show that mercy to one another. So let us not “be anxious about earthly things, but [learn to] love things heavenly, and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, [...]hold fast to” the one “that shall endure,” the mercy of “Jesus Christ our Lord.” Amen.