

The dishonest manager. A bit of a puzzling parable. But as you listen to the story Jesus told, remember to listen to the parable, and then, with care, to the post parable point that Jesus makes. Luke 16...

Maybe its best to begin this morning with the post parable point that Jesus makes, before we try to find the meaning for us in the message of the parable itself. The parable seems strange - truly a puzzle. An owner has a manager who he's been told is squandering his wealth. And the owner fires the manager - but then - the owner commends that same manager for openly cutting deals that seem to cost the owner his rightful income.

Hm? Confusing. Especially in light of post parable point of Jesus - if you can't be honest in the smallest of matters, money matters, you won't be honest in larger matters, and, your life will have no final reward. You cannot serve God, who is truth, and money, which tempts to dishonesty.

But didn't the dishonest steward do just that? Don't we , as we are caught up in this age of rabid consumerism, where everything - from war's success to personal happiness, depends on what we spend.

There's an answer to this puzzle moving around inside Jesus' parable - we just need ears to hear it. Will you please pray with me.

Lord of life, and light for living well. May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of these your loving and faithful people, let more light of truth into our lives this day - from Your word to us in Christ, we pray. Amen.

Do we need proof about Jesus post parable point? About God and mammon? What is it that has held up budget talks in Washington, and, in Lansing, and the contract talks between the Big 3 (or is it now little 3) and the UAW...?

Has the delay in Washington and Lansing been caused by a deep heartfelt concern and desire by all the law makers for the welfare of our country or our great lake state? And for every citizen's best interests?

Or has it really been, most of all, about job protection, about re-election.. about the best interests of the law makers.. And the battle here in Detroit - isn't it, bottom line - what is my piece of the pie going to look like?

And when mammon, money, is a dominant concern for us, other things, important things, fade into the back ground. Friendships, fairness to all, willingness to live by faith in God's goodness and grace. They go - out the window. You cannot serve mammon, and God.

Money - our personal gain - can make us blind to the real issues we face. And that is the strong point of the parable that Jesus told. Yes - it is about a manager who it was said, was dishonest. And then, fired, the manager did in fact become shrewd and, apparently dishonest, rewriting the amounts on the debts owed to his owner.... And so seeking to gain favor with the people among whom he would be living, hopefully able to find support and maybe even work.

And - wonder of wonders - the owner commends him for what he does. And we wonder, how can that be right? The manager cheated, he needs not a pat on the back, but some form of judgement. Some punishment.

And - I wondered when I read it all for the first time a long time ago - and many times since - if I missed something in this parable. And I think I have - and Mary Shertzy, writing in the Christian Century, helped me see it. She helped me read the parable backwards...

There are things about the parable we don't know and wish we did. Did the steward actually in some cases get the owner more payment by collecting something from each debtor? Did the steward in fact only reduce the amount owed by his own percentage of the bill, and so not cheat the owner at all? We don't even know if the Master, having commended the steward then kept the steward.

The parable, in this sense, is really open ended, not intended to be a closed story, but a suggestive one. As often with Jesus' use of parables. And - as we read it - seeking what it might mean for us, what Jesus wanted his disciples then to learn, and us now to hear... It can help to remember that parables generally make one major point. One. They teach one fundamental truth about living at a time.

And if we remember what was happening in Jesus' life and ministry, as reported by Luke, we know that Jesus was teaching about being lost and found, and about a proper understanding of wealth and riches. He told several stories about things lost and found.

In this story, the steward, we are told, lost some of what belonged to his master, and he was found out... and fired. And in the face of his loss, he found a way to refocus his efforts - not on money - but on relationships, on his relationship to the people with whom he would need to continue to live after losing his job.

And - Could it be that not only did the steward actually help his master by collecting something on each debt, but that the master was impressed by the smarts of the steward in trying to protect his future, by the steward's shift in his focus in life?

This parable is a bit like the story of the Father who would not give his son a snake instead of an egg, and so, how much more does God give us what we need. Not money, but all that we need to live is ours by our faith and trust in God's goodness and grace.

Jesus is saying, isn't he, if even a shifty steward realizes that relationships are more important than money, how much more should we as believers in God's goodness, realize that true riches have much much more to do with relationships than money or possessions. With whom we know and how well we know them, with how deep we allow our relationships to become. Our relationships with family and friends have value beyond any thing else.

And Jesus makes the point crystal clear - it is impossible to worship, truly, faithfully, both your possessions and your God. You need to choose. And - note - clearly - the steward in the end chose relationships. The steward chose relationships.

Now this parable is not an Enron case kind of thing. No CEO golden parachute after running a company broke and running off with the cash - sticking it to employees and investors. And this is not tax fraud, or campaign corruption, or the self serving but people damaging failed leadership in Lansing and Washington.

This is a steward who it appears realized that his future relationships with people would be more important than dollars he collected for himself or his master.

And with this parable, and the other teachings here in Luke, Jesus puts us right in the middle of one of the oldest dilemmas we human beings face. Consumerism. A love of, an addiction to, things. Giving in to the power of wanting more and more things and money may be more obvious and blatant in our time than ever before. We produce so many things. But it was a problem for Jesus' day, too. Rich farmers and their barns.

It is a forever problem for human beings, and human societies. What will we value most. And Jesus' parable pushes us to look at our lives and evaluate how we are doing, what we give most time and value to in our lives. Things or relationships.

Does our work, as a way to accumulate wealth, almost consume us - time and energy? Do we need more things to feel good about ourselves? Are things a way we try to please or impress others, even our children? No time for them – but toys instead. Is shopping our favorite pastime, and does our indulgence affect our generosity - our willingness or ability to do things for others... to care and share more deeply with people around us in life, and yes, with God?

With all the things to manage in our lives, can we even see that our relationship with God is more important than anything else in life? And though Jesus doesn't say it here, in his parables over and over again he said it, and demonstrated for his disciples - that the most important thing in his life was his relationship with God. And if that relationship was strong, deep, rich and vital in time spent - then Jesus had the strength and wisdom and will to make right decisions in the living out of his life.

And so can it be for us. We can see this truth for what it is. We can appreciate the richness of relationships and their value in our lives.

A simple potent fact in our society right now points out the truth. Fact is we will all grow older. Yup! Sorry to bring such tough news to you. But its true. At least for you.

And there will come days for almost all of us when we will be completely dependent on others for our comfort and care. And it will be wise for us to build and maintain strong ties of friendship and love and care with our family and friends now. Not unlike the dishonest steward. For - as Jesus told Peter - the day will come when you will be carried by others where you do not want to go.

And when we reach that stage of life, it will be good to be in good relationships with those who will be caring for us. It will be good, as Jesus said in the parable, for us to be as wise as the steward. To build relationships.

It is one of the great tragic fall outs of the AIDS crisis world wide and in the third world where family is the welfare mechanism. And where families have been shattered by the disease - and people are being left wholly on their own . There the Church is serving as best it can to replace the relationships now missing. But the Church has suffered great losses too and is now a very fragile and now stretched way too thin – safety net.

And because human relationship can change, it is good, very good, very very good, for us to be in a strong long vital relationship with God - in whose presence of judgement or grace - we will live forever. To worship, give time and energy too, not things, but to the creator of all good things.

I suppose this could be a very good stewardship sermon, why it is wise to give time each day and week, to our focus on God. And yes, our money too, because it is such a powerful symbol in our lives. This parable begs a bit for me to talk about why we ought to pay our tithe to support God's work through Christ's Church. Why we ought to invest now in our future, which will be completely in God's hands, and not ours.

But Jesus is not concerned in this parable with our money, as much as he is with the powerful impact how we choose to live has on our lives now and forever.

For example , maybe, maybe it was no accident that last year we saw a powerful almost unbelievable act of forgiveness in the Amish Community in Pennsylvania. Forgiveness openly shown toward the person who gunned down so many young people at an Amish School. Forgiveness in the face of such great pain and loss and grief.

Maybe it was only possible because the Amish people work so hard at trying to find ways to keep God and not their things, at the center of their lives.

Maybe, maybe, the point of the parable is just that - a way, a way to ask us all, where we are putting the emphasis in our lives - on things? Or on the giver of all things? And yes - maybe that's what a Reach Out Day is about - a chance to make that point for ourselves - that good deeds trump goods... Maybe that's the message in the orange Brochure - time in study of God's word, more vital than doing things with our things....

Maybe that's what Church is all about - yes - even investing in Church building improvements - building to share in better ways now – and for years and years to come - the good news of God's good word to us -

Yes - Even that good word, come too us in a parable that is a bit challenging to understand. But a parable that does make the point, doesn't it? I hope it has. That we are called in Christ, to learn over and over and over again, to Count on What Counts Most in life...

The love and grace and spirit of the living God - and his way for us to live in Christ, Jesus Our Lord and Savior. Amen.

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