

**15 Pentecost
September 22, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

I think I can safely say that no parable of Jesus's baffles me as thoroughly as the parable of the "shrewd" or "dishonest" servant. Apparently, I'm not alone ... people have struggled to make sense of this particular story from Luke's Gospel for centuries. The parable begins with the words, "there was a rich man" ... it ends with a stark warning to people who "loved money." The author of Luke's gospel is making it clear ... Jesus didn't hesitate to use money as a yardstick to measure our spiritual health. However, Jesus is also pointing to the difference between the currency of the world and the currency of God's kingdom.

Jesus' parable sounds unconventional because the rich man praises the dishonesty of his money manager, even as he fired him for poor performance. Knowing he would be fired, the money manager cooked the books of his boss's clients to their advantage so that they would owe the fired money manager favors when he was unemployed. I don't believe that the rich man's praise is directed toward the manager's dishonesty per se, rather the money manager gets praise for acting shrewdly in regards to what he cared most about ... in this case, money ... and therefore averting a future catastrophe.

Jesus then continued the story by drawing a parallel to the effect that if worldly people are so shrewd in regards to something as "insignificant" as money, should not the faithful be even more shrewd about the "true riches" of life in the kingdom of God? In a final twist, Jesus joins the two strands and concludes with a stark warning: "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth." Jesus is clear ... he is saying that how we relate to money is an important barometer of how we relate to God ... there is a currency of the world, and then there is a currency of God's kingdom.

So, this raises some odd and thorny of questions. Why does the rich man commend his manager for dishonesty? Why does Jesus offer his followers such an unsavory character as a role model? In what sense are the "children of light" supposed to take a cue from the "shrewdness" of a self-interested scoundrel? Am I missing something, or does this story contradict everything Jesus stands for in the rest of the Gospels?

Jesus describes a world we know only too well. In the currency of the world dishonesty, corruption, self-interest, and ill-gotten wealth rule the day. This is a world in which selfish ambition often secures praise and prosperity, while honesty garners cynicism and contempt. Ours is a world in which the heavy burden of debt cripples people both financially and morally.

It is a world in which unfairness, exploitation, and privilege are so systemic, we barely notice ... much less protest. Ours is a world in which ethical living is neither straightforward nor easy.

The truth is we as Christians live in a world that is deeply interconnected and ... at the same time ... profoundly compromised. Even the tiniest financial decision we make has consequences. Where do we shop ... big box or local? How do we invest our money ... in corporations that exploit others yet give us the greatest return on investment, or in a socially-conscious fund? What should I wear ... clothing and shoes made in the USA, or a knock-off and cheaper versions made in Vietnam? What should I eat ... imported produce, or whatever is in season at the local farm stand? When buying an appliance do I ask how large a carbon footprint does this item has? Was this product made with child labor? How does my purchase effect climate change? All those decisions have far-reaching consequences. Jesus's parable reminds us to hold this complicated reality close to our hearts and our consciences all the time. To not do so is to be unconscious of the relationship between the currency of the world and the currency of God's kingdom. Not to do so is to succumb to the darkness.

Some scholars believe that the parables of Jesus were not necessarily to make a point, or have a moral, but rather to start a conversation. So, what is it that we might have a conversation about? What might we learn from this story as it applies to our life today?

When the dishonest money manager realizes that he is in trouble, he sprang into action. He didn't wait around, he didn't despair ... he hotfooted it out the door ... with a plan at the ready. Perhaps it is this sense of urgency, of single-mindedness, of creative possibility and cleverness that wins the manager such high praise from his employer. The manager knows himself well. He knows he's "not strong enough to dig" ... and he knows he's "too ashamed to beg" ... so he focuses instead on redeeming what he can about the situation he finds himself in. In other words, there's something no-nonsense, something determined, and utterly practical about his choices.

Jesus puts it this way: "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." I wonder if this means we can do a better job of engaging the crises, issues, injustices, losses, and failures facing our generation ... facing our country ... facing our world ... right here and now. In what ways are we failing to meet the challenges of our time and place head on? Where in our individual and collective lives are we waiting around ... talking and complaining ... instead of actually doing something? How can we apply an ethical shrewdness ... if you are allowed to put those two words together ... how can we apply an ethical shrewdness to the issues of income inequality, health care, homelessness, and climate change? If we consider ourselves "children of the light," in what areas of our contemporary life have we lost cultural relevance as communities of faith? Where and how might we be more clever, more creative, more single-minded ... more shrewd ... in all we do to make this world a better place? If the manager in Jesus's story can hustle so hard for his own survival, how much more might we contend on behalf of a world that is God's creation ... a world that God loves?

The Jewish High Holy Days are right around the corner ... Rosh Hashanah begins a week from today, and Rom Kippur will be observed on October 8. I have always been taken by some of the words in the Jewish Yom Kippur service, and I like to end by reading a portion ... it seems to fit with this story.

Life is not fair. The wrong people get sick and the wrong people get robbed and the wrong people get killed in wars and in accidents. Some people see life's unfairness and decide, "There is no God; the world is nothing but chaos." Others see the same unfairness and ask themselves, "Where do I get my sense of what is fair and unfair? Where did I get my sense of outrage and indignation, my instinctive response of sympathy? Don't I get these things from God? Doesn't God plant in me a little bit of the divine outrage at the injustices and oppressions in the world, just as God did for the prophets of the Bible? Isn't my feeling of compassion for the afflicted just a reflection of the compassion God feels in seeing the suffering of God's creatures?" Our responding to life's unfairness with sympathy and righteous indignation is God's compassion and God's anger working through us, and it may be the surest proof of all of God's reality.

This parable of the dishonest money manager is certainly unconventional, but it grabs one's attention. Jesus is clear ... he is saying that how we relate to money is an important barometer of how we relate to God ... there is a currency of the world, and then there is a currency of God's kingdom.

In this parable, the rich man praised the dishonest servant ... not for his dishonesty, but for his cleverness. However, Jesus also pointed out the distinction between the wealth of this world as we know it, and the wealth of God's Kingdom.

"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."

If we are to be the "children of light" ... living into the image of God ... then we are invited to apply the same diligence to our life of faith as we do to the currency of the world. Currency is an expression of what we value ... let us be shrewd in the currency of God's kingdom ... the currency of love, compassion, and radical hospitality. God's currency ... a currency that will have value for generations yet unborn.

Amen.