

Sermon for September 22, 2019, Parable of the Unscrupulous manager

Luke 16:1-13

I have to confess that I didn't know I was preaching today until yesterday morning. It came as quite a surprise to me, and the surprise was made even worse by the fact that when we were discussing this parable from Luke in our Community Bible Study on Tuesday morning – the parable of the dishonest manager - I was thinking to myself “Boy I hope I never have to preach on THAT one...” and yet, here I am.

In our Bible Study on Tuesday all the Sisters gave some very valuable perspectives on this parable. Most of us admitted that we found it more than a little confusing, and that it seemed to be one of those parables that contradicts itself. Scholars even disagree about what it means, and they are also divided about whether the sayings at the end concerning wealth and God, are even meant to be a part of this parable.

If we look at this story as some kind of instruction about life and money it is extremely confusing. Jesus himself labels the manager here as dishonest, then says the rich man, his boss, praises him for being dishonest.

But - a totally different way of looking at this confusing story could be – to consider the possibility that maybe Jesus wasn't talking about money at all. Maybe he was just using money here as a metaphor, and he was actually talking about sin, and forgiveness.

One of the significant things about this passage of Luke's Gospel is that it occurs directly after the parable of the Prodigal Son. People tend to get caught up in the family dynamics and the psychology of that parable, but really we have to remind ourselves that the father in that story doesn't represent a human father. He's actually a metaphor for God, and God's forgiveness.

What if the rich man in this parable is also a metaphor for God? What if the dishonest manager is a metaphor for Jesus? In our text the word is dishonest, but in the original Greek the word is actually ah-dee-KEE-ahs, meaning unrighteous or – in direct violation of the law.

When we shift the story into this kind of perspective, we might see God as hearing the people accuse Jesus of breaking the law – of squandering God's goodness by forgiving debts as a metaphor for forgiving sins. And then we hear of God commending his beloved Son for being shrewd. The original Greek here could mean shrewd, but the word PhRON-ee-MO-ter-oy can also mean wise, or "mindful of best interests."

Could it be that the one accused of dishonesty, was actually being mindful of best interests and forgiving sins in direct violation of the Mosaic law? Could it be that God is reminding the Jews here that he is the one who decides which sins are forgiven, and that he is vastly more forgiving than the Temple Cult in Jerusalem, or the scribes and Pharisees with their long lists of infractions and restitutions?

Jesus says here "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Could he have meant that the new generation, which had begun to

follow his way of love and forgiveness, were wiser and more mindful of best interests than the previous generations - the children of light, of God?

The Greek word for debtor in this Gospel passage is creh-oh-FEE-luh-tone, which comes from the root word for debts, oh-FEE-lay-mah, Oh-FEE-lay-mah is used in the original Greek text of the Lord's Prayer to mean "sins." Oh-FEE-lay-mah is also known to scholars as an Aramaic idiom for "sin." Jesus, who spoke Aramaic, may have been using debts and debtors here just as he did in the Lord's Prayer, to describe sin and sinners.

His audience here is the disciples, and at the end of the parable he gives them an instruction. He says "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." He may have been saying to them "Make friends for yourselves by breaking the old laws and being generous in forgiving the sins of your fellow man, so that when all is gone, forgiven, you may find an eternal place with God."

Jesus here could be telling the disciples, and us, to do as he did – to practice forgiveness with our loved ones and our fellow man, even when it defies the rigid structure of law and society.

The sayings about stewardship of wealth at the end of this parable might have been meant to stand separately, but they may also have been meant to describe God's wealth as God's goodness, His mercy and grace. It's a reminder to all of us not to squander the grace and forgiveness that our Father has bestowed upon us, by being unforgiving or failing to give someone the benefit of the doubt, in all of our daily interactions.

We can all ask ourselves “Where in my relationships can I choose to be less rigid, and less judgmental of others?” “Where can I pay forward the gift of God’s grace and mercy instead of keeping score, or calling for the crucifixion of one who has transgressed?”

We all have a long way to go on this one - myself included - and we will all will fail over and over, but thankfully we are the children of a loving God who will always grant us forgiveness.