

Sermon - 09/18/22

Text - Luke 16:1-15

Theme - "Your Master"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every once in a while someone will ask me why pastors don't use storytelling more in their sermons. The person usually says that it would make sermons more enjoyable, entertaining, and understandable. And, they almost always conclude, *Jesus* used parables in His teaching! My response is usually along the lines of: "But just how many of Jesus' parables did the crowds - or even the disciples - understand?" Stories and parables can be an effective means of getting a point across to an audience, but the preacher had better be sure his listeners know what his point is.

In our Gospel lesson today, we have Jesus tell us a story, a parable. But what is His point? What is Jesus trying to get across to His listeners, then and now? On the face of it, this parable seems to be saying that it is OK, even commendable, to lie and cheat and steal - after all, that is precisely what the manager does. In fact, he cheats his master twice: first, when he wastes the master's possessions and wealth (either through incompetence or downright thievery), and then a second time when he alters the bills of several men who owe his master money. And yet Jesus says the master commended the dishonest manager! So, what is Jesus really saying to us here - obviously He is not encouraging us to be unfaithful and dishonest as was that manager, is He? (pause)

Let's begin by reviewing the parable. A rich man has a business manager, who has been wasting his boss's money. Perhaps he has been dipping into the till, so to speak, and helping himself to a little bit of cash. Perhaps he has been helping out his friends who do business with the rich man, giving them inside information and tips and special deals. Perhaps he has

been lazy, not giving his master's business his full attention or best efforts and thus costing him money. Perhaps the manager has simply been incompetent and inept at his job, not knowing what he was doing and so making mistake after mistake, losing his master's money. But however it happened, the man has certainly hurt his boss and the business.

And when the owner finds out about all this, he calls the manager in to explain himself. He demands a full accounting from the man, a thorough audit of the books and all the manager's actions. And then, he says, the man is finished as manager. As soon as the review can be accomplished, the manager will be relieved of all his duties. Fired. Cut loose. Left without a job. Humiliated and embarrassed. Without any prospects for the future – after all, who would hire him now, after word gets out of what happened?

So what is the manager to do? He weighs his options: he knows he is not cut out for heavy labor, like digging, and he knows his pride will not let him survive by begging. No, he will have to come up with something -- and quick -- since the audit is to be done as soon as possible. And here is where we see the shrewdness of the man: immediately he comes up with a plan. He will call together all his master's clients and alter their bills, giving them all discounts that will make them grateful to him – and accomplices to his actions – so that *they* will support him when he is out on the street. He calls in one man, and lowers his debt from 800 gallons of olive oil down to 400 gallons; another who owes 1000 bushels of wheat has it reduced to 800; and so on. And with a special touch of genius, notice that the manager has the *clients* make the changes to the bills themselves, making them guilty too – if he goes down, so will they.

Well, of course, the owner finds out what has happened – he is a clever man himself. But, surprisingly, Jesus says that the owner *commends* this wicked, dishonest, unfaithful manager for his shrewdness. And then, He concludes with these words:

...the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings....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 Money.

It is that last line - *"You cannot serve both God and Money"* - that explains the parable for us and tells us Jesus' point. The manager had TWO masters: the owner of the business, and his own greed and selfishness. So, which was he to serve? As is clear from the parable, he could not serve both, at least not faithfully. No, he chose to serve the second rather than the first. That is, he was devoted to serving his own interests and wants and greed. We see that in the first instance by his "wasting" the master's goods - he did NOT place the owner's welfare first -- it is clear that he was not serving that master at all.

And then, when the owner caught him in his treachery and disloyalty, the manager chooses to continue his allegiance to his other master. He does not even pretend to serve the owner, but thinks only of himself and his greed. In a strange, perverted way the manager IS faithful - although to the wrong master. He acts consistently and shrewdly, in service to his real master: Mammon. And it is for that consistency and shrewdness that the owner commends the wicked, dishonest, faithless manager - at least the man is faithful to that master of Mammon, if not to the one who ought to be his master, the owner. (pause)

So, what does all this mean for us today? Well, as Jesus says at the end of our lesson:

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 Money.

Jesus is telling us that we need to be aware of false gods. In effect, He is simply restating and teaching the First Commandment: **"You shall have no other gods before Me."** Each of us, like the manager in the parable, has been given much by God. We are to be good and faithful

stewards of those gifts He has entrusted to us. Everything we have, everything we do, everything we are about is to be in service to God. Yet, is it? Do we show ourselves to be good and faithful stewards and managers of God's gifts to us? Or have we squandered and wasted them? Where is our allegiance: with God or Mammon? Which do we serve faithfully and first?

Of course, the answer we are too often forced to give is that we have served Mammon, not God. That we have looked out for our own wants and desires, instead of what God has directed. I have not always spent my days, let alone my wealth, in God-pleasing pursuits. I have not placed His Kingdom first, but wanted to be king of my own world. I imagine that you would all have to confess similarly. Maybe we haven't been as blatant and obvious in our false worship at the altar of Money or self, as were the Israelites of Amos' day (as we heard about in our Old Testament lesson) or as that wicked manager in Jesus' parable. But we ARE guilty, all the same, of breaking that First Commandment, of having other gods and of being servants to them instead of the true God.

But there is Good News, even for wicked and shrewd and scheming idolaters like us. St. Paul tells us about it in our Epistle lesson, when he writes:

...(God) wants ALL men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the Truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men: the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a Ransom for ALL men...

Even though we are indeed sinners, God still wants us as His own; He still wants us to be His children; He still loves us. So much, in fact, that He sent His Own Son to be a Ransom, the Payment, for our sin. Your debt – the price for your sin and all you have stolen from God – has been paid for you by Jesus Christ. In His life, Jesus kept the Law and Commandments perfectly – and God credits it all to you. In His death, Jesus has settled your account for you.

There is NO outstanding debt, nothing left for any of us to pay ourselves. Jesus has done it all for us. The books balance – because Jesus has paid the price for us.

In Jesus' parable, the owner – when he discovered the manager's dishonesty in wasting his possessions – would have been entirely justified to have the thieving manager thrown into prison, even executed, for his crimes and unfaithfulness. But he does not. He is merciful and gracious. So is God toward us. He forgives us freely and fully all our sins, for Jesus' sake. He continues to love us and bless us. Certainly we do not deserve such grace from God, but that is His nature. He desires us to come back to Him, to be faithful to Him, to trust Him. There is nothing we need to do – there is nothing we CAN do – to earn our place with Him. But He offers it, He gives it, anyway. Just one more gift from Him, on top of all the others He has already bestowed upon us. (pause)

You are forgiven in Christ, even for your sins against the First Commandment: for your having other gods, for serving Mammon, for squandering and misusing God's gifts entrusted to your stewardship. To tell you this, to absolve you with the Gospel, is my great pleasure and joy as your pastor and as God's servant here. As St. Paul said, so I echo and say: *"...for THIS purpose I was appointed a herald...and a teacher of the true faith"*. Each week here in church, in the worship service, I am privileged to proclaim to you God's love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. To tell you, again and again, that "old, old story of Jesus and His love". To forgive you your sins, in the stead and by the command of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. To preach and teach that Gospel of eternal life, which is yours simply through faith in its message. To serve as steward of the mysteries of God, as you eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith, in the Lord's Supper.

But each of us, as Christians, has a call to be stewards of God's gifts to us, to be good and faithful managers of what God has entrusted to us. Now, quite often – in fact, probably

USUALLY – when we hear the word “stewardship” we think of money. And that is certainly part of it. But it goes so much further than just that. It encompasses EVERYTHING God has given/entrusted to you. Money and earthly possessions, yes. But also relationships and people. Your body and life. But most of all, the Gospel.

God has given you that saving Good News. He has made it yours in Word and Sacrament. He has washed and cleansed you in baptism. He absolves and forgives you, not just here in church but also in your family/friends. He feeds you with Christ’s Body and Blood in the Lord’s Supper. He pours out His heart of love to you in His written Word of Scripture. And as one who has received these greatest of blessings, He calls each of us to steward and share them. To invite others to come to His house. To speak with them of His goodness and grace. To encourage them towards baptism and reception of communion.

He is your Master. And you know how He wants you to serve Him – by receiving AND sharing His love in the Gospel of Christ. God bless our stewardship. In Christ Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS - Nicene Creed
FE - Offertory/Prayers