

SCOUNDREL'S SURPRISE
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Luke 16: 1-8 (The Five Gospels)

There was this rich man whose manager had been accused of squandering his master's property. He called him in and said, "What's this I hear about you? Let's have an audit of your management, because your job is being terminated." The manager said to himself, "What am I going to do? My master is firing me. I'm not able to dig ditches and I'm ashamed to beg. I've got it! I know what I'll do so doors will open for me when I'm removed from management."

So he called in each of his master's debtors. He said to the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He said, "A thousand gallons of olive oil." And he said to him, "Here's your invoice; sit down right now and make it five hundred." Then he said to another, "And how much do you owe?" He said, "A thousand bushels of wheat." He says to him, "Here is your invoice: make it eight hundred." The master praised the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly.¹

This parable of Jesus is probably the most complicated and difficult narrative to understand. The story is difficult because every character in the plot is a scoundrel. Jesus suggests that the Kingdom of God is sometimes like the shrewd of management of resources with people who are less than honest or honorable. That is not how we think of God's Kingdom or the church and its ministry.

Most people imagine that God's rule and the work of the church is above board, diligent, and transparent. We think that in the Kingdom of God integrity will be triumphant, the books will balance, resources will be wisely guarded, and the annual audit will reveal the highest standards and practices of fiscal accounting and management. We expect that our religious leadership will be women and men of absolute integrity, gifted, and wholly dedicated to the mission of the church. With that

¹ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 356-367.

in mind we expect all of the church's programs to be well coordinated, educational, and inspirational. Our children will be courteous in the Kingdom of God, even the Middle school kids. They will not run in Fellowship Hall, tease each other, or squirm in church. The Kingdom of God will surely be without competition, power struggles, or control freaks.

Of course none of this is now nor ever has been true. Not even the disciples of Jesus stand out as a model for faith in action. For example, recall the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him, he taught them saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
 Blessed are the meek...
 Blessed are they who mourn...
 Blessed are the merciful...
 Blessed are they who thirst for justice...
 Blessed are you when persecuted...
 Blessed are you when you suffer...
 Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven...

Then Simon Peter said, 'Do we have to write this down?'
 And Andrew said, 'Are we supposed to know this?'
 And James said, 'Will we have a test on it?'
 And Philip said, 'What if we don't know it?'
 And Bartholomew said, 'Do we have to turn this in?'
 And John said, 'The other disciples didn't have to learn this.'
 And Matthew said, 'When do we get out of here?'
 And Judas said, 'What does this have to do with real life?'

Then one of the Pharisees present asked to see Jesus' lesson plans and inquired of Jesus his terminal objectives in the cognitive domain.

And Jesus wept...²

I think Jesus told this parable because we are too starry eyed about what we imagine the Kingdom to be, or how the church "ought" to operate, or who is allowed into heaven and who is excluded.

² Random Church Humor, www.gb-gm-umc.org/ranierumc_humor.html, 10/11/2001.

Consistently the parables of Jesus tell us that the realm of God is not squeaky clean, pristine, or pure. The presence of God is found among weeds, prodigal sons, moldy bread, and people we assume are unclean and Godforsaken, such as Samaritans, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, gays and lesbians, and *ad infinitum*. Now Jesus compares the Kingdom of God with a bunch of crooks. All of the characters are men of wealth and they are dishonest.

Let us begin with the landowner. One must begin by wondering how an absentee landowner arrived at such wealth. This is the kind of person who typically offered loans to families who owned small farms. It could be that the interest on these loans would prove to be beyond the means of family who would eventually default on their loan. The wealthy man would confiscate their property as repayment for the loan. If the original family was lucky their new landlord would give them work on his new acquisition. The peasants became indentured servants who would have to pay the landowner taxes on the harvest they cultivated.

The manager was hired to oversee these growing commercial agricultural farms. One of his most important jobs was to collect rent and taxes from the farmers and tenants. He would not only charge for the amount due the landlord, but included his own personal fees.

In this parable someone has reported to the landlord that the manager has cheated him. The manager is required to give an accounting and faces dismissal. There is no doubt that the manager made his money by collecting fees, rent and taxes. Someone has told the landlord that the manager has taken more than his fair share, suggesting that he has skimmed from the landlord's accounts. He is anxious because

he will be removed from a life of relative comfort to immediate poverty. He cannot imagine that he is capable of physical labor. His hands are soft and his back is weak. The idea of digging or begging would not only be a demotion, but a disgrace. It would be better if the man would die.

Up to this point we can be pretty certain that both the landlord and the manager made their money by usury and dubious means. The manager then decides that he will ingratiate himself to some of the more successful tenants. He interviews them and asks how much each owed the rich landlord. They show the manager their loan documents and he tells them to alter the amount owed. For example, one man owed a thousand gallons of oil and the manager told him to change it to 500 gallons of oil. Note that the manager does not change the books. He tells them to falsify the records. They gladly take advantage of the opportunity to find some debt relief. By altering their accounts they now join the company of scoundrels by fraud. The manager hopes they will be generous with him at his termination.

Somehow or another, probably from the same source that betrayed the manager in the first place, the landlord learned of the deception and praised the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. We do not know if the manager kept his job, only that he was praised. So as I said earlier, every character in the parable is a crook, and the Kingdom of God is something like the shrewd uses of resources.

If you were to continue reading chapter 16 of Luke you would see that the conversation continues. Luke and other editors of his gospel were not sure what to do with this story and tried to offer some different interpretations of its meaning. The

first comment states, “The children of this world exhibit better sense in dealing with their own kind than do the children of light.” Well, that does not exactly solve the parable, because it introduces the theme of light, which had nothing to do with the narrative in the first place. It does not resolve the element of shrewd or dishonest behavior as a parallel story about the Kingdom of God.

Verse 9 reads,

“I tell you, make use of your ill-gotten gain to make friends for yourselves, so that when the bottom falls out they are there to welcome you into eternal dwelling places.”

This makes even less sense that the first rejoinder. The parable of the shrewd manager is very much told within the context of this world. There are no suggestions about eternal dwelling places. Certainly such a conclusion that there is a relationship between ill-gotten gains and eternal dwelling places is not suggested in the story that Jesus told.

Luke and his editors do not seem convinced with these two responses, so he throws in a few more interpretive statements. Verse 10 reads:

“The one who can be trusted in trivial matters can also be trusted with large amounts; and the one who cheats in trivial matters will also cheat where large amounts are concerned. So, if you couldn’t be trusted with ill-gotten gain, who will trust you with real wealth? And if you can’t be trusted with something that belongs to another, who will let you have property of yours own?”

This interpretation fails initially because the debtors did not have trivial amounts of debt, but rather, significant debt. Secondly, distrust is one of the normative operating assumptions here. Everyone in this story is looking out only for one’s self. They are

all willing to cheat. The landlord praises the manager because he had shrewdly navigated the commerce of wealth and distrust.

Finally we read:

“No servant can be a slave to two masters. No doubt that slave will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and disdain the other. You can’t be enslaved to both God and a bank account.”

Well, there is a lot of truth in that statement! It is wise and worthy of a sermon unto itself. But I cannot see that it has any relationship with the parable of the shrewd manager. There is only one master in this story, the landlord. The manager had no doubt about whom he served and sought to survive under that economic fiefdom.

So now we are back to square one. What are we going to do with the parable that Jesus taught? Attempts at allegory fail us. May I suggest that the story is meant to shake us out of our assumptions about what the Kingdom of God is and who are the agents of God. It might even encourage us to be suspicious who we think are the enemies of God.

These scoundrels surprise us because they suggest that working of God’s grace often takes operates in places and by means that we do not even comprehend. I was talking with a man a few weeks ago who told me that God only worked among the peoples of the Abrahamic faith, such as Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I asked if God could not also be found among Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains. He replied with certainty, “No!” I replied, “But how can we comprehend the mind of God? Who can know the heart of God so thoroughly that we can determine who is loved or damned by God?”

It reminds me of the Zen story of the great artist. His work was exquisite and all of the wealthy elite of Japan demanded his services. The subject of his paintings was immaterial to him. He painted children, Samurai warriors, geishas, members of court, landlords and leaders of commerce. What the people did not like about the artist is the fact that he charged the most outlandish fees. He was extravagantly expensive but his work was so sterling they grudgingly paid his price. Other artists complained that he was a prostitute of art and resented the money that his work commanded. Of course they were jealous of his wealth and skill.

Their egos were so busy with gossip that no one bothered to notice that new roads were built from outlying villages. Improved transportation allowed farmers to bring their produce to market and enhance their own livelihoods. A bridge was erected that brought together two differing provinces to enhance cultural and commercial growth. Schools and medical facilities began to emerge in communities that did not have them.

No one ever knew that all of this life giving work was the result of that artistic scoundrel. It turns out that he lived a very modest life style and gave his bounteous profits for the enhanced of life of those around him.

Likewise, Jesus is suggesting that we are not in a position to limit the love of God or decide for God who gets to serve. In truth the movement of grace has always relied of very fallible human beings. Are we not all like the minister who was passing a group of young teens sitting on the Church lawn and stopped to ask what they were doing?

"Nothing much, Pastor," replied the one lad. "We're just seeing who can tell the biggest lie about their sex life."

"Boys! Boys! Boys!" intoned the minister, "I'm shocked. When I was your age, I never even thought about sex at all."

The boys looked at each other and then all replied, pretty much in unison,

"You win, Pastor!"³

Indeed, there are probably more liars, crooks, swindlers, and shady characters running around the Kingdom of God than we know about or could possibly imagine. You would be surprised. So, don't worry about the scoundrels. Jesus would tell us, "Seek first the Kingdom, it's not our place to worry about who gets in. Just seek the Kingdom."

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³ "The Biggest Lie," Joke du Jour; www.jokedujour.com/archive/clergy05.html.
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