

Year C, Pentecost 18
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Luke 16:1-8

Is Jesus the Dishonest Manager?

“Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager...” Jesus has just told three stories and they all were addressed to the religious and educational leaders who built their sense of superiority on being better than others. But Luke points out that this fourth story has a different focus. Now Jesus is speaking to his disciples. I wonder what difference that makes. His disciples want to follow Jesus and have already sacrificed considerably to do that. They are heading toward Jerusalem now and they have just heard how God delights in those humans look upon with disdain. Jesus is clearly not looking at people the way they do. In handing out God’s love so freely, is Jesus ripping God off. Is he giving away God’s love too cheaply, making it something you don’t have to be better than others to earn? Is Jesus the dishonest manager?

By the time of Jesus the vast majority of the population had lost their ownership of the land. Taxes had become so high the people fell in debt and finally were forced to sell their land to pay the taxes. Wealthy people in positions of power bought this land and the farming people thereafter worked for them. Those who owned the land didn’t want to live near it, preferring to live in cities and near other people who also owned large tracts of land. To run the farms they hired managers and these managers were given great authority to handle the day to day affairs of the farm.

So now we understand the manager in Jesus’ story. He is the one caught between the rich man who owns the land and the resentful farmers who farm it. The rich man wants his farm to make money and the farmers wants to keep as much of the fruit of their toil as they can. The manager occupies a position fraught with tension that can come from either side and soon does.

Someone, perhaps an unhappy farm worker, brings charges against the manager. This is the one way in which they can apply force from their side of the labor, management divide. They can go over the manager’s head and bring an accusation to the land owner and this is what they do. They accuse the manager of squandering the land owner’s property.

So why is Jesus telling this story this way? Are the disciples in the role of the unhappy farm worker who wants a bigger take-home for their investment in Jesus and so charge him, at least

in their minds, with misappropriating love and compassion by giving it too freely? After all, they should be getting more of the good stuff since they are disciples.

Jesus senses that the disciples are actually siding toward the crowds in thinking the bad people don't deserve God's love and delight? In being so inclusive of them, causing them to feel valued and precious, is he giving away God's specialness for nothing; squandering God's wealth uselessly? If this is how the disciples view Jesus then he is like the manager and they are bringing charges against him. He shouldn't be giving away something they have sacrificed everything to acquire. It's not fair. They are like the resentful older brother in the story of the prodigal's return who refuses to welcome the returning prodigal even though he is his brother. And this, by the way, is the story Jesus told just before he turns and tells his disciples this morning's story.

In Jesus' story, that has something to do with what's going on between Jesus and his disciples, the land owner summons the manager and says to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." If you think about it, this is a strange sequence of events. The land owner asks a question of the manager but gives him no opportunity to explain himself. He asks for an accounting but then tells him he's fired before he can say a word.

Does this remind you of anything? It reminds me of Jesus standing before the crowd who accuses him of terrible things and has no interest what-so-ever in his guilt or innocence. He is just guilty and condemned because he has been accepting people he should not be accepting. He hasn't been abiding by the rules on who to exclude and for that reason they exclude him.

If we take this interpretation, then the owner of the land is us; it's the way of the world, we humans are the ones who own the world and rule it through the threat of throwing out those we dislike. And in the case of Jesus we dislike the One who squanders the power of acceptance and exclusion by making it useless for controlling people and giving the excluders a way of feeling better than others. If all people are "in" from God's point of view, how do you threaten anyone with being "out"? In granting grace to all, you squander the master's power, the master's means for control, the world's way of keeping peace through the threat of exclusion. This is how the disciples are thinking and Jesus wants to get inside their world and subvert it.

So the manager has been fired but news of his dismissal hasn't gotten out yet. What should he do? Is there any way to salvage this situation? He considers his options and realizes he is not strong enough for hard labor and has too much self-esteem to beg. But there is one thing he can do, one power he can exercise as long as he does it before the news hits the streets. He can forgive and forgiveness is such a wonderful thing that people will love him for it and open their hearts to him and perhaps invite him into their homes after knowledge of his dismissal

becomes public. Is this true? Do we love Jesus because he forgives us? Do we love him enough to invite him into our homes? Do we feel safe in his presence because we know he looks upon us with gentle eyes? He knows who we are and still he loves us! How good is that! And none of us escape his love, even those who feel unworthy.

And could it be that the dismissal the story describes is Jesus' death on the cross? Certainly that's the place where we humans dismiss him, accusing him of giving love and forgiveness to those who don't deserve it. At first we humans wondered if he might represent God but then we decided that he didn't and in fact, was a danger to the God we follow. But by then it's too late. The deed was done and God's love, even in the midst of our hate, had been revealed. The cat was out of the bag. The genie had escaped the bottle. History had been changed. Our debts had already been revealed as forgiven.

Well, our love squandering, falsely-accused manager summons this world's caught people one by one; those who are in so deep they have no hope of ever escaping and here is what he does: "He asks the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He answered. 'A hundred jugs of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' Suddenly the heavily burdened man feels he has a chance, he can cope with fifty. "Then he asks another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.'" Even the twenty percent reduction is a huge relief and should leave the debtor with a sense of gratitude.

Does the 50% versus 20% amount forgiven that Jesus builds into the story reflect back on the prodigal son story where the prodigal is forgiven more, but both are forgiven much and both have an opportunity of living in gratitude toward the benevolent father who loves them both? Remember, Jesus told this story to the disciples, those who thought of themselves as deserving more because they had left all to follow him.

Now we come to the sudden twist, the end of the story that gives the rest of the story its spin. "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. "

Suddenly the master commends the dishonest manager. We didn't expect that. It surprises us. But doesn't it say in the New Testament that in the crucifixion God played a trick on us and that we fell right into it. We exposed ourselves as people who falsely blame and condemn by falsely blaming and condemning the One most innocent. And then when this innocent, condemned One, forgave us, the whole power game through exclusion got subverted, revealed for what it is and made unworkable. If the world can't exclude, how will it survive?

Jesus has just pulled a bait and switch on us. And it has to do with the character of the God we thought we were following. We thought the character of God was demonstrated when he called the manager to an accounting for squandering his power by including everyone and excluding no one. But maybe that way of doing things doesn't come from God at all and is the way of the world, our way, us being a very cruel God to ourselves. We are the ones who use the threat of exclusion as a way of controlling each other, but it's not God's way. God's way is to love all and refrain from crushing anyone. That's why the story commends the "dishonest manager". The "dishonest manager" shows us the character of Jesus' Abba who loves all.

Jesus is the dishonest manager, from the world's point of view, because he freely gives away the very thing the world hordes in order to control its people. He gives away forgiveness, mercy and love. In doing this, the shrewdness of Jesus reveals a deeper wisdom than the "children of light" think they have cornered. Have the disciples been thinking of themselves as the "children of light?" This might explain why Jesus told them the story in the first place.