

“Buried Treasure”

Sunday, September 19, 2010

Jeremiah 8: 18-9:1 (*God will not restore*)

1 Timothy 2: 1-7 (*what must we do to be restored*)

Luke 16: 1-13 (*You cannot serve God and wealth*)

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"These wisdom sayings are ... advising us to deal astutely with this world fully as it is, on its own terms, but also knowing full well that it is temporary and failing. We are to reach through this passing world to embrace the coming world of God's kingdom."

“*Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves*” comes to mind as I read this parable of Jesus... one confusing lesson told by Jesus. As I have sorted through different commentator’s views, it seems quite clear that this parable of Jesus has baffled interpreters more than any other. It is confounding, complex, and challenges our understandings about God.

Let me begin by saying that Jesus always taught in parables, or stories using terms and concepts that occurred in the hearer’s daily lives to describe life in the kingdom of God. As a matter of fact, Matthew makes this point somewhat extreme when he says in 13:34 that “He did not say anything to them without using a parable.” Why?

Most of Jesus’ parables have several fascinating commonalities. **First**, each one ends with a repeated phrase. “Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear,” for example. This phrase is almost a parable in itself and if you are like me, you might initially say, “huh?” and go right back to the beginning. In today’s parable, the ending phrase is: “You cannot serve God and Mammon.” Mammon is a Semitic word for money. And if the first part of the parable didn’t confuse you, how this part relates is even more confusing.

Second, most parables involve a hiddenness that eventually becomes visible. Like the seeds planted on different kinds of ground or the mustard seed planted – hidden under soil whose potential for growth eventually becomes clear.

Third, most parables involve a surprise – a surprising variety of harvests, a surprising answer about what to do with weeds, in this case a surprising congratulations to a steward who uses dishonesty to gain wealth.

So, parables work by hiding the truth so that we need to do more than simply “hear with our ears” or “read with our eyes” on a literal level. We have to invest ourselves in an imaginative search for meaning – a meaning that will surprise us when discover, or un-hide it for ourselves.

Over the last few Sundays, Jesus has been teaching in parables to a shifting audience...from "large crowds" (Luke 14:25), to "Pharisees and the scribes" (15:2) – the religious leaders, to now, "the disciples." (16:1). So Jesus is speaking, in this parable, primarily to his closest followers, the ones who are really supposed to have special access to what Jesus means.

So, what are we to make of the story of the shrewd manager (or steward or agent) who is commended for using dishonesty as a strategy to win friends? And what about the concluding saying that seems only loosely connected to the parable itself (you cannot serve God and wealth)? What is hidden that needs to become visible?

To begin with, Jesus makes a kind of “reverse surprise” that makes interpreting this parable particularly difficult. What trips most of us up is that fact that the master (ie: God) seems to congratulate this particular instance of dishonesty. Most of us find it a bit disturbing that Jesus would find anything commendable in a person who has acted dishonestly. If I were to ask you if you think it is ever OK to be dishonest, what would you say? Most of us value truth as a most foundational ethic and principle that Jesus asks us to live by. This passage seems to suggest that there may be times when it is OK to be dishonest. Now *that* is a surprising message from Jesus.

Fred Craddock, a highly regarded Biblical Scholar and Disciples minister says, almost dismissively... “why that should prove offensive is not fully clear, for everyone is a mixed bag of the commendable and the less commendable.”

Is Jesus just being realistic here? He understands human nature, as he himself is also human. Is Jesus advising us to deal astutely with the world fully as it is, even as we seek to reach *through* this passing world to embrace the coming of God’s kingdom? Must we both live “in” the world as we seek to “transform” it at the same time?

The reality is, all of us, at one time or another, have been dishonest. From the husband who tells the wife that he really likes her outfit or her hair cut because otherwise it will upset her. Or the daughter who stretches the truth about a grade so that she won’t either be punished or misunderstood. Or the person who says one thing on the outside but does another.

There was an interesting incident this week involving Derek Jeter, the much-admired All-Star shortstop for the New York Yankees. He was up at bat, attempting to bunt when a pitch came right at him. As he jumped back, the ball appeared to hit him before rolling out towards first base. The umpire immediately awarded Jeter first base, as Jeter bent over in apparent pain, holding his hand gingerly. In the meantime, the opposing team manager came out to claim that the ball had hit the bat, not Jeter, and that he should be out. The manager argued so vehemently that he was thrown out of the game. As it turns out, the video replays showed that the ball did in fact hit Jeter’s bat-- not his hand. He admitted as much after the game.

The question filling the airwaves was whether Jeter had cheated, whether he *used* the moment dishonestly for gain. Most, though not all, observers said, “No, that’s the game of baseball.” That’s why there are umpires. Some of their mistakes work against you, and some work in your favor. If you can pretend that something happened and it works in your favor, so be it. It happens every day in soccer, football, and basketball. Players in all those sports take a fall in the hope that a foul will be called on an opponent. Sometimes a player gets the call; sometimes not; and sometimes the effort is just laughable. And, of course, there are plenty of fouls committed that are not seen, and not penalized. Like it or not, that has become part of sports.

But it's not just sports. Most of us have moments of dishonest behavior. Sometimes it's a white lie when we tell someone that they look great when they don't; that they have done a great job when they haven't; that we love them when we're not so sure.

Is this, then, OK according to Jesus as he commends the quick witted dishonesty of the manager?

There are many reasons that we fall prey to the slippery slope of deception. Often, we feel we are protecting others by not disclosing the full truth... and that *can* be true. We can spare a deeper pain for the time being, but is that right?

Often, we are protecting ourselves from the inevitable energy and conflict it will cause to tell the truth when it reflects poorly on us.

Often, a dishonest move can help us to gain favor.

And sometimes, perhaps in this case, a dishonest move comes out of desperation.

So let's look at "the dishonest manager" from a different perspective. He is about to lose his home, his job and everything he owns, at which point (dare I suggest like the prodigal) he "comes to his senses." He says to himself: "I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." In other words, so that he does not shame himself into homelessness. He doesn't fall on his knees, as does the wayward son in the parable previous, which feels right to us. Rather, he uses an additional offensive quality to secure his future: he is shrewd, or clever. He thinks his way out of unemployment. He is both dishonest and smart about it.

We generally associate "shrewd" with people who use self-serving, if not ethically questionable behavior to get what they want or need. People like Wall Street financiers; CEO's who receive unimaginable bonus' for "screwing" the public. It is pretty difficult to think of a "shrewd" saint. So using words such as "shrewd" and "clever" to describe "people of the kingdom" ("children of light) feels offensive. However, shrewd also implies an intellectual keen-ness; using the God given gift of your mind to problem solve. Here, Jesus seems to value the ability of the manager to "think" his way out of punishment rather than suffer some pretty horrible consequences. Remember that Jesus did also say, according to Matthew 10:16, that the disciples would need to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" in order to navigate the challenging terrain of gospel-living.

Here is where Eugene Peterson's translation really resonates for me, which suggests that Jesus wants us to be smart in the same way the dishonest manager was – but for what is right; that we must use every adversity to stimulate us to creative survival and generosity, concentrating on the basic necessities and "scattering abroad" our overflow with compassion and justice. The original Greek verb for "squander" (*diaskorpizo*) describes the notion of "scattering something such as seed" (e.g. Matt. 25:24, 26). Thus, the dishonest manager could have been "scattering" his masters property with a generous intent, unlike the prodigal who "squandered" or "scattered" his inheritance in dissolute, or wasteful living. Still, God welcomed them both.

And finally, in order to go even deeper, you cannot leave out the final saying of the parable, which seems always in parables, to interpret the point. “You cannot serve both God and Mammon...” or “God and Wealth.” If that is the case, then this verse interprets the parable to mean that disciples are to handle material things, possessions, their money, so as to secure heaven and the future... which is to say that how one handles property has eternal consequences. If we understand that Jesus never speaks in a vacuum, and go back and look at other things he has said about possessions, could he intend for us to put them together to make a whole? Earlier in verse, 12:33 he tells this disciples to “sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail.” I wonder, then, for all the dangers in possessions, if Jesus is saying it *is* possible to manage goods in ways appropriate to life in the kingdom of God?

We are left, ultimately, with more questions than answers. With unrelated sayings that speak to different perspectives about how to live both in this world, and simultaneously the Kingdom of God. The confounding nature of the story itself, confronting us with alternate values, drives us deeper into the story itself to find what is hidden beneath. And the use of common and understood cultural objects, such as wheat and bread and salt and economics and weeds and sheep and goats reminds us that the life of the disciple is one of faithful attention to the tasks and details of *everyday* life, however small and insignificant they may seem.

Dishonesty for the purpose of good? No... the point, at least for me, is not about the managers dishonesty, but rather the smart and motivated decisions he made to survive, forgiving the debt of a people who could never afford to pay it all back. God praises his perseverance, and his willingness to act. The master could have done far worse to him than simply fire him from the work he was doing. He was, after all, a slave who “scattered his masters property” amongst other slaves, and assisting them in developing their own resources.

As Fred Craddock wisely interpreted, “*most of us will not this week christen a ship, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, vote for a county executive, teach a Sunday school class, share a meal, tell a child a story, go to choir practice, and feed the neighbor’s cat.*” “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.” Amen.

