

Proper 20C (Pentecost 17) 2010

Text: Luke 16:1-15

Title: Managers

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Another week, another parable.

Last week it was the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son. Or better, it was the searching shepherd, the cleaning woman, and the waiting father.

This parable was simple and straightforward. We get lost. Jesus finds us. Heaven rejoices.

It was easy for us to understand and apply. Jesus is pitching batting practice. Nice and easy, right over the plate. Okay Jesus, we get it.

But not today.

Today Jesus throws a nasty curveball. Right when you think you know where it's going, it breaks hard in another direction.

Now we shouldn't be surprised when Jesus' parables don't make sense. We shouldn't be surprised when we don't understand them. Jesus says that He speaks in parables precisely so that folks won't understand them. There are many examples in the parables of people acting in strange and unusual ways.

Today's parable is arguably the most difficult of Jesus' parables to understand and apply. There are pages and pages of commentary written by Biblical scholars, and no one seems to agree what this parable is about.

Jesus seems to be saying, "It's okay to cheat and steal, as long you do it for the right reasons." Go ahead, cheat on your taxes and embezzle money, and as long as you've got a good reason for it, it's okay.

But is that what Jesus is saying here?

Let's take a closer look at this parable from the top, but let's look at things from a different perspective. Instead of focusing on the manager or the steward, let's look at things from the point of view of the lord. Just like last week, we were better off talking about the shepherd than the sheep, or the woman than the coin, this week our focus should be on the Lord first, rather than the manager.

Now a lord, by definition, owns land. That's what makes you a lord- you own land. Think of our term- landlord. That's what it means.

So this lord owned a large plot of land. Jesus tells us that he's rich. Being wealthy, he's not going to bother working the land himself. It's a lot easier and more lucrative to rent out your land to other folks.

So that's what he did. He rented out plots of land to farmers. In exchange for the right to work the land, these tenant farmers would give him a portion of their crops- grain, olive oil, grapes that sort of thing as rent for the land.

Now the lord wasn't about to keep track of all the rent payments himself, so he had a manager, or a steward to run the day-to-day business of the operation. The main job of the manager would be to collect the rent, and use that rent to make sure that the lord's own household was taken care of.

But the manager did not take good care of the lord's goods. Jesus says that he "squandered" or "wasted" them. This is the same word used for what the prodigal son did with his Father's inheritance when he spent it on parties and prostitutes.

The manager was skimming off the top. He was embezzling funds from the lord. He was stealing and using the money for himself.

And he got caught. And he got fired.

But here's where things get strange. Normally, what happens when someone gets caught stealing from the company?

First, they are usually fired on the spot. Clean out your desk and leave.

And then they usually have to repay the money that they stole.

And finally, they may face criminal prosecution. You can end up in jail.

It was the same in Jesus' day. If you were caught stealing, you would not only be fired on the spot, but you would typically be fined and imprisoned.

But is the manager fired immediately? No.

Is the manager fined and made to repay what he stole? No.

Is the manager thrown into prison? No.

This lord does an unusual thing. He fires the manager, but he lets him keep working for him, at least for a short time. He lets him hold onto the books. He shows mercy to his manager

And so the manager does something smart, shrewd, prudent. He calls in the tenants and has them reduce their bills. Take 50 measures of oil off your bill. Take 20 off measures of grain.

Now this is the difficult part of the parable, because we don't know for sure exactly what's going on when the manager reduces the bill. There's a chance that he's reducing the master's profit, and using this to his own advantage. But there's another possibility.

In those days, managers made a living by commission. The lord and the manager would agree together on how much rent to collect. But in order to make a living, the manager would charge the tenants a little extra on top of the rent as their commission. The manager would keep this portion as his salary.

So what might be going on here is this: the manager is taking his commission rate off of the rent. He's giving the tenants the straight-up pricing.

The manager is now showing mercy and leniency to the tenants, just as the lord showed mercy and leniency to him.

And this is why the manager is commending the manager. Not because he's stealing more money from him, but because he is showing kindness to the tenants by reducing their bills.

So what's the point? What are we supposed to learn from this parable?

We don't start with the manager. We don't focus on what he does,

It starts with the Lord, this strange Lord who entrusts all his possessions to this incompetent and sneaky manager.

You, too, are a manager. Everything that you have does not belong to you. It's not yours. It belongs to the Lord and you are merely a manager.

Like the manager in the story, you're not very good at it. You squander and waste what the Lord has entrusted to you. You use what the Lord has entrusted to you for yourself, for your own benefit. You spend your money on yourself. You spend your time doing what you want to do. You put yourself first.

And, like the manager, you get caught. You can't hide it. No matter how well you cook the books, the almighty auditor will find out.

And there's nothing that you can do. Like the manager, you have no way to earn your own way.

But the lord gives you a second chance. He's patient with you. He doesn't fine you or throw you in prison right away.

And so what will you do with your second chance? What the manager does is actually use the lord's possessions for other people. He shows mercy and leniency to the other folks.

What the manager is doing when he reduces the bills of the tenants, is that he's reducing his own income, not the lord's. He's trusting that in the future, he will receive a benefit for his kindness.

And here's the second point. Use what you've been given for the benefit of others, with an eye towards the future.

This applies both to your possessions, your money, your stuff, and to spiritual gifts as well.

The "unrighteous wealth" is considered a "very little." It's not really that important, but it is important that you use it faithfully. Even "the sons of this age" know this much. You don't have to be a Christian to be generous. You don't have to be a Christian to realize that there's more to life than possessions, and that you can't take your wealth with you.

But there's more for you.

The true riches are the heavenly riches, the heavenly treasures and inheritance. If you are faithful with the little things- things like more and possession, then you will be trusted with the good stuff- the spiritual, eternal, heavenly riches.

There's a reason for this. If you're only about serving money, then you have no room for God. The manager went from serving money and himself to serving other folks, and he was commended for it.

Good stewardship, good management of all things, earthly and spiritual, flows from trust in God. And your trust in God flows from His trust in you. God trusts you, and He entrusts you to manage His household. He's a strange Lord to trust you with such responsibility. It doesn't make much sense. But the gospel doesn't make sense. God's love and grace and mercy are beyond our understanding.