

“Commending Shrewdness”

Luke 16:1-13

23 September 2007

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Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said 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.’

Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked 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.’

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.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Prayer.

There was a television series that came to an end this past spring; one that had many in America waiting and watching with great anticipation. After many years the HBO series “The Soprano’s” was coming to completion. As the final episode of the final year drew to an end, and as we watched the clock tick down the final moments, the excitement built to an unsustainable peak, when, all of a sudden, the screen went to black. Writers and producers later reported that they wanted each viewer to create the ending in their own imagination. Oi! what a let down!

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The Soprano's wasn't for everybody. Children and many adults should steer clear. They are very up front with their rating: R for restricted to adults over the age of 18, MA for mature audiences, N for nudity, and V for violence. It pretty much covers it all. The Soprano's was about the people involved in organized crime. It took off all the blinders and sugarcoating, and it exposed the viewer to the raw, violent nature of being a mobster.

You might be surprised that I watched and enjoyed The Soprano's. "What? a pastor watching that kind of filth?" Indeed, I wouldn't watch it with my mother in the room. "Why," you might ask, "would you watch such a thing?"

This summer also marked the end of another era. The seventh of seven books in the Harry Potter series came out to wide acclaim. Millions waited up until midnight, cued in lines at their favorite bookstore, many dressed the parts, to snap up their first copy of J.K. Rowling's final book. It was likewise mirrored with the release of the fifth film in the series. I'm confident that it broke all kinds of box office records.

Many of you know the theme. The author creates a fantasy world of wizards and witches, goblins and giants and dragons. In this world she follows a group of youth matriculating through a school of magic named Hogwarts, all-the-while facing off with the evil Lord Voldemort.

Many in conservative Christian circles have condemned these books as being un-Christian because they barely mention religion, spirituality, or faith; instead, they argue, they promote antisocial behavior, cultic or satanic lifestyle, and black magic.

Yet, I must admit, I've read every one in the series, and, as soon as Cynthia and Nicholas finished their final book, I sat down and read it through, too.

And I liked it!

Again you may ask, "What is the pastor doing reading that kind of thing?"

As I survey the body of epistles, of letters sent by the apostle Paul, Peter, John, and others, I see one of the overarching themes is how the Christian community is being encouraged to wait faithfully for the return of Jesus Christ. Waiting means living in the world but, at the same time, not being transformed by the world. Waiting means we must remain strong, unified, and focused on the ways of Christ, not bickering, quarreling, and living according to the ways of the world.

The apostle Paul writes to his faith community in Rome "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

Living with the Soprano's, but not being transformed by the Soprano's, is where the

fine line is to be drawn. I do not, nor ever will, glorify violence, murder, or organized crime. Yet, we live in an age where we are surrounded by these realities. I will not, nor ever will, promote witchcraft, wizardry, or satanic magic. Yet, we live in an age where these may be very real negative influences upon our children.

As Christians we walk the fine line of living in the world, while not becoming one with the world. Rather, followers of Jesus Christ live in the world with the expectation that we will change the world.

At best, I must admit, I squeezed out of the Soprano's and Harry Potter nothing more than sheer entertainment.

But before we move on, before we forget about it, our gospel lesson for this morning asks us to stop and take a second look. Our gospel lesson for this morning asserts that while we are living in the world, lessons may be drawn by observing the behavior of the world we so seek to change.

Our gospel lesson for this morning is a parable of Jesus that is about two rascals. It is a parable unlike few others. It does not have a parallel in Matthew, Mark, or John. It is not an allegory, which is to say, the rich man is not a stand in, or metaphor, for God and the slave is not a foil for the story, or a stand in representing the human condition. This parable is different than the parable of the prodigal and his brother, immediately preceding today's passage, and completely different from the Good Samaritan, found even earlier.

Jesus had been preparing the disciples and the crowd for this parable. He'd been doing the necessary preparation work with his parable of the Rich Fool, the cost of discipleship, and teaching about humility and hospitality. In the passages following today's parable, Jesus will punctuate his point with his story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

The field that Jesus has been plowing is one that makes it impossible for one to obtain and keep material wealth. Bigger barns and full granaries may be a sign of wealth, but it comes at the expense of denying food to someone who is hungry, and what, then, will be the benefit when God demands the soul that very night?

"You can not serve God and wealth," Jesus concludes today. (Luke 16:13c)

So, simply by definition, a wealthy man is a rascal. Yes, he may be a member of the upper class, the privileged, the proletariat, even a member of a royal line. But he is still a rascal. So, when Jesus begins this parable for his disciples with **"There was a rich man who had a manager ..."** (Luke 16:1a), Jesus is making a statement: this guy is a sinner. Learn from him. But don't be like him.

Now, let's talk about this manager; the manager that had been squandering his master's property. He is also a rascal. But, you have to admit, he is quite the ingenious rascal, isn't he?

His present is imperiled. He is going to be fired. So he immediately adapts and begins to plan for his future. He forgives debt, albeit without authorization, recognizing the fact that forgiveness has the potential of future dividends. He didn't do it deceitfully, or behind his master's back. He simply forgave debts, with the anticipation of future rewards.

Now first time hearers of this parable, whether they be disciples of Jesus two thousand years ago, or some of us seated in these pews this morning, we allow our imagination to jump ahead of the story a little, don't we? We can see in our mind's eye how the master should be enraged by the actions of his rascally manager, actions that cost him money lots of money.

But, instead, Jesus surprises us. **“His master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.”** (Luke 16:8a) The master resorts to compassion and mercy; compassion and mercy that supplanted the mercy and compassion that the dishonest manager had planned for with his master's creditors.

Whether it came from the master or from the creditors, the dishonest manager had shrewdly worked it out such that compassion and mercy would see him home ... indeed, as Jesus said, that he may be welcomed into the eternal home. (Luke 16:9)

So, if we are to live in the world of sin, but not be a contributor to it; if we are to live in this world, but not be a part of it; if we are to dive into this parable of Jesus, but not become rascals like the leading characters, then what is it that we can observe? What can we learn? What are the gems that Jesus meant to convey to us, such that we don't become rascals ourselves?

1. First and foremost, Jesus is teaching his disciples to be shrewd in our behavior. Not dishonest, mind you, but shrewd in every transaction, careful stewards of what God has entrusted to us, not wasting one unnecessary thing.

For example, are our savings wisely invested, such that they will maximize the highest potential return, while having the least possible negative social impact? Have we paid the least amount possible, while maintaining the highest possible quality, at the same time being reflective of Christ?

We can live in the world of marketing and advertising, buying and selling, but we need to be as shrewd as the wisest business man, as smart as the most conservative banker, and as generous as the most loving Samaritan.

Being shrewd is not a bad thing. It is a quality that Jesus lifts up.

2. Secondly, when we ask “what, precisely, is it that the steward does, albeit without authorization and with deception?” The answer leads us to the second point: The steward forgives debts.¹

The steward forgives. And so should we, as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It's a moral of great emphasis for Luke: FORGIVE. Forgive it all. Forgive it now. Forgive it for any reason you want, or for no reason at all. Irregardless of motive or scheme, forgive.

...Why forgive someone who's sinned against us, or against our sense of what is obviously right? We don't have to do it out of love for the other person, if we're not there yet. We could forgive the other person because of that whole business of what we pray in Jesus' name every Sunday morning, and because we know we'd like forgiveness ourselves. We could forgive because we've experienced what we're like as unforgiving people.

We know that refusing to forgive because we don't want the other person to benefit is, as the saying goes, like eating rat poison hoping it will hurt the rat. We could forgive because we are, or we want to be, deeply in touch with a sense of Jesus' power to forgive and free sinners like us. Or we could forgive because we think it will improve our odds of winning the lottery.

It boils down to the same thing: deluded or sane, selfish or unselfish, there is no bad reason to forgive. Extending the kind of grace God shows us in every possible arena -- financial and moral -- can only put us more deeply in touch with God's grace.

3. And finally, Jesus is using this story of two rascals to teach us about the importance of mercy and compassion.

The bottom line in both stories, of the returning Prodigal in chapter 15 and of the Dishonest Manager in chapter 16, is to find a way to warrant mercy and be welcomed home.

Before the Prodigal Son even has a chance to work his scheme, he finds his father running out to welcome him home.

The dishonest steward shows mercy to the master's clients in a way that will reflect kindly on the honor of the master within the community. Whether in the home of another wealthy person or in the home of his current master, he expects the end result to be that "people may welcome me into their homes."

¹ With thanks to: http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/proper20c.htm

Being welcomed home seems to be the goal in both Luke 15 and 16. For the faithful, the goal isn't to obtain our own collection of wealth through dishonest dealings. The goal is to come into that eternal home which only Jesus promises.

Unfortunately, the only phrase many casual readers of the text take away, as a memorable trinket, from today's unique lesson is the final sentence: "You cannot serve God and wealth." (Luke 16:13c NRSV), or, in the old King James Version "You cannot serve God and mammon." But to do so, one overlooks the message of Jesus inherent in this parable, to be shrewd while we wait, to forgive without exception, and to extend mercy and compassion, without ever holding back.

So, can we live in the world, and not be transformed by it? Even Tony Soprano valued loyalty, friendship, love, and home. Even Harry Potter exemplifies good overcoming evil, the value of loyalty and friendship, and the love of family. Yes, there is much to be learned from realms far outside of conventional Christian norms.

We should not, and cannot, isolate ourselves. Rather, Jesus quite convincingly makes the statement today that we should use the world to learn how to better transform the world for his purpose.

Be shrewd, but not sinful. Be forgiving; but do not withdrawal or isolate. Extend mercy, because, when it comes to Jesus, mercy is always the right thing to do. Amen.