

Yeah, you heard that right. Our Gospel lesson this morning does sound suspiciously like Jesus is praising dishonesty, deceit, and corruption. It's an odd passage, and it appears frustratingly incompatible with the Gospel message of self-sacrifice and relationship and communal responsibility.

I think most of us who pay attention to Scripture have a knee-jerk instinct to either gloss over the tough passages and instead focus on the parts that affirm what we already hold as true and good, or we get so frustrated with problematic passages that we really just want to throw our hands up in the air and bemoan how any of it can be divine revelation. (I admit it, that's pretty much what I did earlier this week.)

Mark Twain was famous for his derision of the Bible – in his view, the Bible was little more than a collection of liars, cheats, adulterers, megalomaniacs ... all of whom are reportedly beloved of God. Well, to tell the truth, Twain was right: “God does lean overboard in support of a host of sleazy types who live fast and loose [with] the Ten Commandments.”¹ Throughout the Bible, God does tend to favor con artists and murderers: God rescues Cain after he kills his brother; there's Jacob who stole his brother's birthright and becomes Israel, the patriarch of God's chosen people; and King David, beloved of God, an adulterer, who had Uriah murdered to eliminate him as an obstacle to Bathsheba. The list is really quite long.

This morning, we encounter a parable seemingly celebrating corruption and deception. Does it not seem like this is a little *messed up*? Why is Jesus telling this story?

Let's back up a second and consider who Jesus' audience was at this point in Luke's Gospel. The scene opens at the beginning of chapter 15, where tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes are grumbling because he has been welcoming and sharing table fellowship with sinners. What follows are the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and Prodigal Son: each with the theme of finding what was lost or estranged. Luke

¹ Buttrick, 212.

structures of each of these 3 parables in the same way as his parable of the dishonest manager that follows immediately afterward. (1) A person who has something of value is introduced, (2) that person's valuable thing or special person is lost or squandered, (3) a celebration ensues, and (4) a moral is articulated. And so it seems that these parables make up a unit, each building upon the morals of those before it.

Luke's moral to the parable of the lost sheep is that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."² You may remember from last week that the moral of the parable of the lost coin is "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."³ And Luke's moral to the parable of the prodigal son is in the voice of the father who says, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."⁴

Jesus has been teaching the scribes and Pharisees that **all** are welcome at God's table because **everyone** is of immeasurable value to God. And now he turns his attention to the disciples and tells them this unusual parable. As a stand-alone, this passage seemingly extols the virtues of corruption. But when read in light of the previous parables, perhaps the deceit isn't what is being held up, but rather the manager who foregoes his own financial gain in an effort to foster relationship.

It was normal for the rich to hire managers to collect on loans made to those of lower standing. Despite the illegal practice of usury being addressed in the Torah multiple times,⁵ the lending of money with unreasonably high interest rates was commonplace. To skirt this prohibition, the manager would demand containers of wheat or jugs of oil that would more than compensate the lender for the original loan. And added to that sum was a sizeable cut for the manager as a sort of commission ... It was a thoroughly corrupt lending system.

As Jesus' story unfolds, it seems that the manager reduced the debt load owed to the rich man by what may have been the amount of his commission. The manager could have forgiven the debts altogether or demanded what would be pennies on

² Luke 15:7

³ Luke 15:10

⁴ Luke 15:31b-32

⁵ Prohibitions against this practice can be found in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy – announcing that one cannot charge interest on loans, particularly of fellow Jews

the dollar for the loan, but instead, the rich man got back what he loaned ~ and possibly with at least some interest intact.

Of course the manager's choices are clearly motivated by self-interest, but (however inadvertent on the part of the manager) grace enters the picture. From the manager's perspective, he trades his own revenue to make friends with the hoi poloi in order to take advantage of them later. But the way Jesus tells the story, from Jesus' perspective, the manager surrenders the opportunity to accumulate more 'dishonest wealth,' and in doing so did an even better thing by establishing relationships with those of lower social status.

Perhaps in light of the previous parables, the moral of this story is also about losing and finding ... or perhaps more specifically, never having had something before and discovering the free gift of something which possesses infinite and eternal value. This is twofold: first, Jesus praises the manager for his recognition that the 'lowly' are the ones with the more significant power, the ones that can offer an 'eternal home.'

And second: I think Jesus told this story here, following the other parables, to the disciples within earshot of the scribes and Pharisees, to point out just how lost the scribes and Pharisees are. They were the power mongers of the day, who knew the Law inside and out, who abused their positions of authority for their own gain and security, who were so desperate to define who were the insiders and who were the outsiders, that they neglected the spirit of the very Law they thought they were protecting. Jesus tells this parable to say "don't be like those who would use people for the benefit of money (or security or power) rather than using money for the benefit of people.'

The next few verses following this parable are helpful, despite not being included in the lectionary reading this morning. Luke's Gospel goes on to say, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed [Jesus]. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.'"⁶ That's the moral of this story.

One other note about this parable – Jesus fabricates a character for his story, the manager, who was in a position that was notoriously corrupt in those days, and portrays him as scared, selfish, and deceitful. This product of Jesus' imagination,

⁶ Luke 16:14-15

created to reveal and reflect a divine truth, is so thoroughly and completely human. And this fictional character stumbles into doing something good. Jesus then praises him for it.

So if Jesus can imagine a thoroughly corrupt person unwittingly pleasing God, perhaps real/live people like us who are thoroughly and completely human ... who were also imagined by God and created to reflect the image of God ... who really are trying to do the right thing and yet screw up time and again ... maybe we can end up pleasing God, too. That is such good news! That is the hope given to us through the confounding Scriptural stories of all those unsavory people.

God's love and grace is not always rational. God in Christ 'consorts with crooks,'⁷ and welcomes sinners and eats with them.⁸ Those who arguably deserve to be outsiders are welcomed in and a party is thrown in their honor. The first are last, and the weak are made strong, and the poor are the inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. That is messed up ... gloriously and miraculously and blessedly **messed up**. We might not be engaged in deliberate exploitation of others, we've not murdered anyone or stolen anyone's birthright ... but really, we're really not that different from the dishonest manager or Cain or Jacob or David. And if they can stumble into God's heart and be beloved of God, maybe we can, too.

⁷ Capon, (book on parables – title unknown at the moment), page 307

⁸ Luke 15:2b