

Sermon for Trinity 9 - Luke 16:1-9

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was a scandal that would make news headlines even today: "High-Ranking Corporate Official Embezzles Fortune before being Fired." Did you catch it? This was the story in today's Gospel reading: "... my master is taking the management away from me ... I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people will accept me into their houses ..." What's his scheme? Cook the books: "You owe 100? Make it only 50!" "You also owe 100? Now make it only 80!" By so doing, the dishonest manger was able to gain the graces of his master's debtors. He had a keen eye in looking out for number one. He was going to use any means possible- even illegal ones- to secure his own selfish future. His theft was despicable! His behavior was vile! His actions were deplorable! His zeal for getting what he wanted no matter the consequences was endorsed by Jesus. ...Wait a minute ... What!?!?

That's right! Let's remember after all, that it's our Lord who's telling the story here. It's His parable. He says, "The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." There's our Lord's own endorsement here in His parable! What scandal! Why does He speak in such a way? Today's Old Testament reading will help us out here. This 2 Samuel reading is also prayed by King David in Psalm 18: "With the merciful, You show Yourself merciful; with the blameless man, You show Yourself blameless; with the purified You deal purely; ..." Yes, that all makes sense. God shows his virtues to those who are virtuous. But here's the kicker, the real head-scratcher: "with the crooked, You make Yourself seem tortuous." Tortuous, not to be confused with "torturous," means, "twisted, winding, convoluted." God takes on this characteristic with the crooked and the wicked, of whom I am chief. He relates to us even with examples of crooked, wicked people to relay the Kingdom of Heaven to us. So what does this mean for the story before us today?

In order to understand this parable, we've got to remember that not all parables are alike. Some parables teach us to "go and do likewise." Such examples of this are the Good Samaritan who aided the half-dead man along the road. Another would be the tax-collector who humbled himself in the temple, beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." These are truly great examples for us to follow.

But this is NOT the way in which all parables should be interpreted. Note that everyday life is being taken through the parables of Jesus. He finds illustrations and sketches of people exactly as they are. For instance, there was the man who found a treasure in a field and acted deceptively in neglecting to tell the owner about it, but went ahead and bought that field for himself. Or what about that disgruntled neighbor who finally caves into his needful neighbor's request for bread, just so he could be left alone? Or how about the one about the unjust judge who loved neither God nor man, but grants the persistent widow's request so that if nothing else, she'd stop bothering him? These examples are by no means the way in which Christians should act or interact with others. That being the case, there is however, always some truth that can be gleaned from these pictures from the sinful world. There's something within these parables that illuminates the Kingdom of God, as all parables do. So what on earth is the hidden truth of God's Kingdom that can come from an underhanded manager ripping off his master?

While the actions of the dishonest manager are blatantly sinful, one can still admire his wisdom, his shrewdness, his zeal. He was going to stop at nothing to secure his earthly future, even doing that which was illegal. One could say the same thing about drug lords or other sinful vocations: They want to be rich, wealthy, and powerful no matter what the cost. The prize that all of them pursue will not last, of course, but by golly, they are going to stop at nothing to get it. They chase after the fleeting destined-for-moth-and-rust-destruction things of this world with such single-minded zeal as though their life depended on it!

But what about us? Of course we shouldn't lust after earthly riches and power as the sons of this world do. But do we zealously seek the Kingdom of God and its eternal treasures that moth and rust cannot destroy? Do we look forward to and anticipate receiving Christ's forgiveness in Bread and Wine and Word as we do to receiving our next online internet order? Do we cheer with such vigor and vim over one sinner who repents as we do when the Royals win? Do we read our Scriptures with the same focused attention we pay to our favorite TV shows? The sons of this world go after perishable crowns and wealth with unbridled zeal. Should our zeal not far exceed theirs in seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, treasures that can never be taken away!?

Instead we do just the opposite. We take for granted God's Kingdom, His righteousness, and our forgiveness in Christ and consider them really not all that important. Everything will be right in the end. We procrastinate. We imagine the devil is fake, the world has no real hold on us, and that we are fine just the way we are. Sure we seek to gain our souls, but we also want to keep the freedoms of the natural man. We want both: to be a friend of God AND a friend of this world. Where do your loyalties lie? As the rich man said to his manager, so God says to us today: "Give an account!"

If we're truly honest with ourselves, we have not sought the righteousness of God and His gifts. In fact, our whole life is a scandal to Him and His name. Yet let us not forget the true scandal of the Kingdom of God, as St. Paul calls it: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ Crucified, a stumbling block [lit. in Greek a "*skandolon*," a scandal] to Jews and folly to Gentiles ..." And therefore nobody can out-scandalize God, for in His cross is the ultimate scandal. No scandal surpasses the Innocent Man who is the Son of God dying in our place for the very sins we've transgressed against Him! In perfect zeal, God would stop at nothing to have you as His own child, even giving His Only-Begotten Son for you! Is your debt against God 100? Do not make it 50 or 80. He has made it zero. Christ Crucified has removed every last one of your sins. Indeed, "... the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

That which is right and wise before God often looks like foolishness to the world. We live in order to serve others. We are stewards who have no real ownership. We risk persecution and ridicule and dare to trust God in danger. We chose to suffer martyrdom than to be unfaithful to God – all this seems like foolishness to the world. Yet in Christ we have a Friend to receive us into eternal dwellings when treasure, health, and wealth fail. "What is the world to me!/My Jesus is my treasure,/My life, my health, my wealth,/My friend, my love, my pleasure,/My joy, my crown, my all,/My bliss eternally./Once more, then, I declare:/What is the world to me!" Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠