

Sermon for Trinity 9 – Luke 16:1-9

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

The parable of the Unjust Steward may well be the most difficult of all of Jesus' parables. In this story, a crooked business manager attempts to feather his bed after having been fired. Then, he's held high in admiration, as his master commends him. It's senseless. We're told that the steward mismanages his master's possessions. Then, when this point is called to question and he's fired, he cooks the books and steals even more from his master! We assume this makes the steward a villain and a bad guy. But afterwards, the same master ... praises him! How should we confront this parable's built-in contradiction?

Time to explain this story in order: A nameless informant tells a certain rich man that his steward has been wasting his money and possessions. Next, the master – without any trial or fair inquiry – simply reads the steward the riot act: “What’s this I hear? You’re a disgrace! Turn in your books! You’re fired!” The steward comes out of his master’s office with almost none of his old life left at all. What now?

Watch. The steward says to himself, “What should I do now that my master has taken away my stewardship? I’m not strong enough to work as a laborer. I’m too proud to be a beggar. Aha! I’ve got it! I’ll use my brains to ace out that unforgiving tyrant. So he wants to play letter-of-the-law games, does he? So he would like me to turn in the books, eh? Well, I’ll do just that – after I’ve made a few ... adjustments.”

What he does, of course, is call in his master’s debtors and settles accounts with them at considerable write-offs: “He said to the first [debtor], ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and write eighty.’” He knocks the bill of one of them down by half, the bill of another down by a fifth. What’s the result? “The master commended the unjust steward for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.”

What was that again? “...the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing ... than the sons of light.” Christians are the sons of light. But the sons of this world restlessly chase wealth, luxury, and pleasure. So what does this mean? The sons of this world know how to treat something that they think is valuable. They love money and the earthly comforts that come with it. They jump to get the job with higher pay and greater prestige. They will stop at nothing to get the bigger house and faster car.

Yet all of this, as we know, will fade away and wear out. The sons of this world, too, are set for destruction, but at least they pursue it with vigor! They know what they want, and they go after it. We do well to mimic their zeal, though not in chasing treasures that moth and rust will soon destroy.

As Christians, we desire the joy of eternal dwellings, but sometimes you would hardly know it! And so, we are rightly accused of lacking zeal for the kingdom of God. For we have

not pursued what we supposedly value with the same zeal that the sons of this world pursue what they value. We don't seek fellowship with the Father like the sons of this world seek the comfort that money provides. We don't put on purity with the enthusiasm that the sons of this world put on the latest fashions. We don't invest in the work of the Church (Which is our very salvation!) with the same zeal that the sons of this world invest in the stock markets. Repent.

Again, the master praised the unjust steward for this zealous shrewdness. Somehow, between verse 2 ("What's this? You're fired!") and verse 8 ("My beaming boy! You're a genius") something changed. What happened?

The steward died (at least in regards to his old life). And he is freed by his death to think things he could not have thought before. He is the one who, from the bottom of the heap, as it were, becomes the agent of life for everybody in the parable. He becomes life from the dead for his master, because somehow the sight of that loser pulling off a stunt like this in the very thick of his losses finally loosens the old boy up: "My goodness!" the master says, "My whole life has been a joke, and only now have I learned to laugh at it!?" But the steward is also able to be the resurrection of his master's debtors because they wouldn't consent to deal with anyone but a crook like themselves: they would not have gone near him if they hadn't been convinced that he had authority over all the laws of respectable bookkeeping, but who was also like them.

And so the unjust steward is nothing less than the Christ-figure in this parable—a dead ringer for Jesus. First of all, he dies and rises like Jesus. Second, by his death and resurrection, he raises others, just like Jesus did. And third, the unjust steward is the Christ-figure because he became a crook, like Jesus.

St. Paul said it this way: "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus died as a criminal. He became sin for us sinners, weak for us weaklings, lost for us losers, and dead for us dead. By Jesus' unjust death, He is the only mediator and advocate the likes of us will ever be able to trust, because like the unjust steward, he became no less a loser than we are—and like the steward, He is the only one who has even a chance of getting the Lord God to give us a kind word.

And Christ, the One True Son of Light, pursued His death on the cross with the most zeal and single-mindedness. He squanders the possessions of His Father with wanton abandon, not in wastefulness, but for your benefit. The treasures of heaven can't be wasted. They never run out. And so He lavishes the grace and mercy of God upon you without price, without charging you a cent, without bookkeeping, without demanding any accounting of you. Christ takes all that belongs to the Father and gives it to you in abundance.

Lucky for us, we don't have a *just* steward. Amen.

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