

**Sermon, Proper 20, “Dishonest Manager”, September 22, 2019, Jane A. Beebe**

“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.” (Luke 16:9-10)

One of the realities of the “dishonest manager’s” life is that in Jesus’ time this person was probably a slave. Slaves do not have much agency to change or influence the course of events around them—or even what happens to their bodies. Their lives are compromised. If this slave is let go by the rich man, there are few options to even maintain a meager existence, to stay alive. The dishonest manager is honest at least in one thing. He has the self-awareness to admit that digging ditches is not an option. Another translation for the word ‘dishonest’ is ‘unrighteous.’ So there seems there is more going on here than a story about someone cooking the books—and weirdly, doing this with the approval of the boss.

How do you react when you hear that the rich man *commends* the manager for his actions—even calling them shrewd? Surely Jesus is not praising the manager’s dishonesty! One meaning of the word ‘commend’ is to praise or to mention approvingly. It also has the sense of putting something into someone’s care or keeping, or to entrust. The manager must have had some skills, some gifts, or would not have the job as manager in the first place. Yet the manager wastes

what has been entrusted to him. There is some resonance with the Parable of the Talents in Matthew where one servant, in his fear, buries the talent he has been given by the master rather than investing it.

What I love about this parable is its sheer messiness. Jesus seems to recognize that many of us are in that place where we are doing the best we can, yet the outcomes are not perfect. Despite our best efforts we live with compromise, with disappointment, with loss. Yet Jesus tells us that, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much...” (Luke 16:10) Although the manager in question has squandered what has been given to him, he actually does a wonderful thing in an effort to secure his future. He shrinks what is owed by the rich man’s debtors. It is self-serving, certainly. Yet it eases the burdens of the debtors. The jugs of oil are cut from one hundred to fifty, the containers of wheat from one hundred to eighty.

The ethics of the Jewish economy are outlined in Deuteronomy, the book that lays out how we are to love God and our neighbor. Deuteronomy 15 speaks of the sabbatical year: “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the LORD’s remission has been proclaimed.” (Deuteronomy 15:1-2) What makes this possible is God’s providence. God goes on to declare:

“There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.” (Deuteronomy 15:4-5) Jesus codifies this idea for us in the Lord’s Prayer. The version in Matthew has, “...And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...” (Matthew 6:12)

A few days ago I went for a walk in the Quabbin reservoir. In my drives to and from North Brookfield I pass the turnoff on the way to Belchertown. Believe it or not, it was only a few weeks ago that I decided to park there and walk up the road to the water for the first time. While cars can drive in there, once one is stopped in a parking area all seems quiet and peaceful. The water and the sky were a pristine blue. I had an overwhelming sense of peace—and even holiness—in this place. It struck me that this is a place that I encountered when only about halfway on my journey: neither here nor there. This caused me to wonder what can happen when we are in the middle of things, when not everything is resolved, when the tasks are not finished. Perhaps we have taken some steps towards wholeness, towards being better stewards of what has been entrusted to us. We may not have all the answers, or what we have learned is confusing rather than enlightening. Can we find peace in the unfinished, in the imperfect? Can we be open to God’s beauty even while feeling our indebtedness?

Jesus tells us to, “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” (Luke 16:9) What are these “eternal homes” Jesus speaks of? It is the manager’s hope that he might receive invitations into actual households so that he might have a roof over his head. However, the English translation from the Greek hides a beautiful message. The “homes” to which Jesus refers are tents, or tabernacles. Jesus could be pointing to the “Tent of Meeting,” the portable earthly dwelling place of God in the time of Moses.

It is a wonderful thing to be welcomed in, to be received, most especially when we are in need. I have a memory—more than two decades old—of sitting with a friend in a beautiful place by a stream. The friend was encouraging me to take in the loveliness of the setting. Yet I could not let go of the anxiety I was feeling. I felt overwhelmed and ashamed of all the things I felt I could not fix, especially my debts. Like the unrighteous manager I had squandered what I had been given. Thankfully I am now able to go back to that moment, lay my hand on that troubled person, and assure her that God is inviting her into an eternal home.

It is true that we cannot serve God and wealth. Yet this is good news, not merely an admonition. If we let go of wealth, if we forgive what we think is owed to us in order to put our focus on God, God will bless us, is blessing us in every moment. There is a balm in Gilead. Even in the in-between places, the

compromised places, God comes to us in the tent of meeting, is present to us. As our collect today bids us: "...Even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, [we are] to hold fast to those that shall endure."