

Martha C. Langford
First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange Texas
22 September 2019
Luke 16:1-13

Bartered Salvation

Luke's gospel takes most of the parables and miracle stories and places them together as an extended sequence. So, this story joins the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son.

Most of these parables we have a handle on—we can find our place in them, can tease out the outlines of the godly economy that Jesus proclaims, that he calls the kingdom of God.

This parable—well—let me share the response of one commentator who complains about Luke's puzzling money talk asking, "could you not confuse matters with this odd parable that seems to commend cheating? What the what is going on here?"¹

The parable begins pretty simply: a "certain" rich man has a manager—our main characters are lined up, and nothing seems TOO odd.

Our manager—the οἰκονόμος—was the steward of his master's property. He was probably a freed slave and he held a position of great trust. It would have been his responsibility to take care of the household accounts, to see that the servants were paid fairly and to ensure the minor children received adequate support.

Think of him as the chief financial officer for a wealthy, extended family.

Word comes to the rich man that his steward was "squandering" his property. We've only made it to the second half of the first sentence, and we've hit conflicted interpretational waters. The Greek word for squander means to scatter, or to waste, to disperse into the wind. It's what the prodigal son did with his inheritance in the foreign land.

Lots of ink has been spilled (LOTS OF INK) over the manager's "criminal intent" or lack of it. Was he lining his own pockets with his master's money? Was he just a poor manager who had trouble keeping the books? Was he too generous with the household? Did he throw good money after bad investments?

For some he is as conniving as a contestant on Survivor and for others as hapless as Barney Fife.

We will never know.

All we know is that the boss hears rumors about problems and the manager gets a pink slip. Only one more thing is required—the rich man wants to see the books.

I'm kind of amazed at this nameless manager's honest self-assessment—just what a Career Coach would counsel during a job transition. With brutal clarity, he announces, "I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg." We must take his word that those are his realistic choices for future employment.

I don't know when this parable got its name, but in it the manager is often called dishonest or unjust. But it seems to be a stroke of calculated genius—of shrewdness—when he "cooks" the books to create his own golden parachute.

He reduces the debts owed to the estate, 20 percent, 50 percent. He does it in person, one by one, inviting the debtors to rewrite their own bills. Talk about customer service! He invests his last days as a manager cultivating relationships with those who can give him a future.

The kicker is this—the master discovers this scheme and doesn't prosecute the manager, he praises him instead. And it seems Jesus does too, telling his disciples: "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

What the what, indeed!

By its very oddness, this parable seems to have deeper meaning; yet, that meaning is elusive we are left to wrestle with the questions.

Stanley Hauerwas talks about how preachers "find ways to make this parable die of a thousand qualifications..." He points out that Christians spend time interpreting the commendation of the dishonest steward "and forget that Jesus is making a claim about our money."²

Now I'll go to meddling.

I grew up bi-theological, a child of a progressive Presbyterian Church and a student at a conservative Southern Baptist School. At school, I actually heard a sermon once about "Money: the root of all evils." But in my home congregation, I learned more of the passage which begins "For the love of money is the root of all evils" (1 Tim 6:10).

I learned that faithfulness and money meant keeping money in its proper perspective. I was, in the words of Jesus, to serve God and not wealth, to trust in God and not money, it was all about maintaining the right attitude.

Hauerwas notes that this parable doesn't fit that easy interpretation and he writes, "Jesus does not suggest that the problem is the attitude we take toward God and/or wealth. Rather He tells us quite frankly if we have money we are in trouble when it comes to getting into the Kingdom of Heaven."

Why might that be?

When I was growing up, I made my spending money by mowing lawns and cleaning houses. It was strictly a friends and family affair, so it didn't register with me as "real" job. But I will never forget the first paycheck I got from Casual Corner, made all the more "real" with that income tax withholding and the size of that corporate check.

It was a moment of great pride for me. Honest pay for honest work. I felt that it was money I deserved. After all, I had spent the heat wave of July 1980, in Houston, selling wool suits and rabbit fur coats to mall patrons 36 hours a week!

Honest money, and it was MINE ALL MINE.

And here is where the parable begins to work on me...

Jesus tells us that the manager is a steward—this man has been entrusted with the finances and the well-being of the family.

Psalm 24:1 has been called the greatest stewardship verse in the Bible: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it..." With hand-rubbing glee, what I had forgotten was this: all that we are and all that we possess rightfully belongs to God.

Theologian Donald McKim writes, "Jesus used the parable to comment on the use of material possessions and urge followers to act faithfully and give primary allegiance to serving God rather than riches."³

Jesus tells his disciples—and us—that we can be faithful with wealth that is not our own.

Jesus commands us to use our resources in godly ways, ways that further the kingdom. We support our own families, and those who work with and for us. We care for those who have no other to care for them: who, in Jesus' own words, are the poor and the hungry, those who mourn and those who are persecuted and those who are our enemies.

We are to cultivate relationships, which is the same and yet different from the actions of this shrewd steward. The example is NOT about creating a safety net with people of means who will in turn take care of you; it is about creating friendships with those who have no means; friendships characterized by "commonality and equality."⁴

And in cultivating relationships by relieving social inequities and building common ground may just give us a glimpse into inner workings of God's kingdom. Because it is not our generosity that saves us, but the generosity of God.

Our God—the one who seeks the lost sheep, who sends the Son to find us and claim our hearts and bring us back into God's fold. This is the father who does not condemn his prodigal son but when the son returns, rushes out to restore him to the family.

This is the master who praises his manager's initiative rather than prosecuting his manager's dishonesty. This is the God of forgiveness and reconciliation, of justice and of peace.

The manager would barter his master's wealth for "eternal" security AND even as he marks the debts paid—**we know** who pays the price.

Hauerwas writes, "God is a generous God who offers us forgiveness of our sins—sins that are all the more powerful because we cannot will our way out of them. We are caught, but God has freed us from our 'caughtness' through Jesus Christ..."⁵

We are freed, we are forgiven and the "true riches" that come to us are the gifts of God's generosity and God's grace—forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with one another.

This week, I had "Greek geek" moment. Differences in Bible translations led me to the Greek lexicon to learn more about the manager in this parable. He is described as an οἰκονόμος—the word for steward. But Thayer's Lexicon points out that Christian teachers and leaders are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1) and that all who follow Jesus are "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10).

We live up to those responsibilities, whenever we seek to share what has been entrusted to us to promote the common good.

So we use our money to help the poor and feed the hungry. We use our compassion to comfort those who mourn. We lift our voices to protest persecution and oppression. We seek to wage peace with our enemies.

We do this even as we confess own complicity in the brokenness and injustice that surround us. We do this even as we pray for God's kingdom to come. We do this as stewards of the gospel – through which and in which extraordinary things unfold. Amen.

¹ Jill Duffield. "Looking into the Lectionary-September 18, 2016." *The Presbyterian Outlook*. 16 September 2016.

² Stanley Hauerwas. "Living on Dishonest Wealth." *Journal for Preachers: Advent 1996*. 15.

³ Donald McKim. "Luke 16:1-13: Connecting the Reading to Scripture." *Connections*. Year C. Vol 3. (Louisville: WJK, 2019) 332.

⁴ Charles Cousar. "Proper 20, Luke 16:1-13." *Texts for Preaching: Year C*. Louisville: WJK, 1994. 526.

⁵ Hauerwas. 17.