

Season after Pentecost [Year C]

September 22, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Amos 8: 4-7; Psalm 113; 1 Timothy 2: 1-7; Luke 16: 1-8 (9-13)

“Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen”

There is a Jewish folk tale about two brothers who learned to farm from their father and when he died the brothers continued to farm the land together. They shared equally in all the work and split the profits exactly. Each had his own granary. One of the brothers had a large family; the other brother was single.

One day the single brother thought to himself, “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. My brother has many mouths to feed, while I have but one. I know what I’ll do. I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother’s granary.” So, each night when it was dark, he carefully carried a sack of grain, placing it in his brother’s barn.

Now the married brother thought to himself, “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have many children to care for me in my old age, and my brother has none. I know what I’ll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my brother’s granary.” And he did.

Each morning the two brothers were amazed to discover that though they had removed a sack of grain the night before, they had just as many.

One night the two brothers met each other half way between their barns, each carrying a sack of grain. Then they understood the mystery. They embraced. They loved each other deeply.¹

Now why couldn’t Jesus tell a nice Jewish folk tale like that instead of this outlandish parable? It’s outrageousness cannot be blunted by skillful interpretation! None of Jesus’ stories had titles, but this one we usually label the “parable of the dishonest [or shrewd] manager.” But I wonder. Last week’s parables were usually called the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. But weren’t they really about the persistent shepherd,

woman, LORD who are dogged determined to find the lost? This week the title, “parable of the dishonest manager,” may also draw our focus to the wrong character.

Jesus tells a story about a rich man who had a manager whom he heard was stealing from him. The boss calls in the squandering employee saying, “What is this I hear about you? Show me the books. You can’t be my manager any longer.” Then a real swindle begins. The guy calls in his boss’s debtors telling them, “Here, I’ll write off your debts to my boss, just to show you what a nice person I am,” thinking, “When I’m fired for my thievery, these people, for whom I’ve written off huge debts (at the expense of my boss) will help me out.”

Then Jesus says the boss calls in the swindling manager and says, “Pretty shrewd, you little crook; I wish everyone in my company showed as much initiative and creativity as you.”² Really? Really, Jesus? Doesn’t he know we have children and good church folks listening to this story? What’s with commending self-serving dishonesty and thievery?

Scholars, theologians, pastors and laity find this parable to be a stumper and a stinker. This is obviously not one of those “go to likewise” parables. The rest of Scripture shows that Jesus would not advocate stealing, conniving manipulation or insincerity. So what is the point Jesus is trying to make? Parables are suppose to make us curious and stick in our imaginations and crawl. They are meant to keep coming to mind, like a niggling memory or picture you can’t quite place and just won’t let go. Well, here’s what has come to my mind this week.

Right before this in Luke’s gospel, the church folks had been fussing with Jesus about hanging around sinners and tax collectors. Right before this we have the parable of the son who spit in the face of his father, grabbed his inheritance and squandered it. Yet the father celebrates when his boy comes home with his tail tucked between his legs. The father lavishes grace upon his rebellious son — fits him with the clothing, sandals and ring restoring the boy fully as his son and then throws a party. It seems the sinner who has hurt and dishonored the one to whom he should have loved and obeyed, gets rewarded, like

this dishonest manager. And if you consider yourself to be like the righteous son, faithful and obedient to the father, you find this tremendously unfair, wasteful and disturbing. Ah, but what if you have sinned or fallen short of what is good and right in God's eyes? What if there have been times we ignored God, claimed our resources to be ours alone and hurt our relationships? Then we would find the outrageous love and forgiveness of the father to be immensely comforting and hopeful, maybe even transforming.

Similarly, perhaps the rich man in today's parable, like the father in the prodigal son, is meant to show us something about the depth and extent of our Lord's love. Maybe this isn't the "parable of the dishonest manager" at all but the "parable of the outrageous savior." Two times the rich man shows grace to the dirty, rotten scoundrel manger. First when he doesn't have him thrown into jail for squandering his property. Second when he doesn't punish the dirty rotten scoundrel for the stunt he pulled with the his debtors. It's really an outrageously gracious way for the owner and CEO of his own company to act toward the manager who had betrayed his trust. It offends our sensibilities. Makes us shake our heads and fists ---- "It's not right. It's not fair." Until....

Until we let ourselves be seated with the tax collectors and sinners who gathered around Jesus, realizing we too misuse and squander the gifts of God as if they were solely our own. We have used life for less than honorable pursuits. We have used our money and resources to get the latest and newest gadgets, car, or fashions to persuade others we are cool, to be admired or envied. We can use the brains God has given us to be cunning and to be tricky with the truth to get our way. We can apply flattery and employ alluring gifts to gain the acceptance we want. Suddenly the undeserved, unearned grace of the rich man looks different. If the Lord could still find some quality of value in the scoundrel manager's shrewdness, than maybe the Lord can see passed my sin, my stumblings and wrong turns to see something loving, something worth saving in me. And there is the truth, the gospel in a nutshell.

Jesus sat and ate with, loved and forgave the least, lost and last. Jesus died between two thieves — gave his life for those who would share their blessings with their brother and those dirty rotten scoundrels who would squander their gifts faithlessly for that which will not bring them lasting peace. We may not like all of Jesus’s parables. But thank goodness Jesus never tired of trying to teach us “we are saved not because of who we are but rather because of who God is. We are saved by the grace of God.” So let us grab that outrageous grace and truth, my dear brothers and sisters, and let us live into it with lives that show thanksgiving, that show God’s own love, mercy and grace to others. “Let all the dirty rotten scoundrels say, “Amen!”³

Linda M. Alessandri 9/21/13

ENDNOTES

1. William R. White, Stories for Telling, “The Two Brothers” (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) p. 30-31

2. Story summary adapted from William Willimon’s retelling in “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels,” his article on Luke 16: 1-9, published for Pulpit Resources 2010

3. William Willimon, “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels”