

Sundays after Pentecost - Year C [Proper 20]

September 22, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Psalm 113; Luke 16: 1-13

There is a story of a man who left 17 camels to his three sons. He left one-half to his eldest son, a third to his second son and a ninth to his third son. Despairing of their inability to negotiate a solution - because 2, 3 or 9 cannot divide 17 evenly — the sons finally consulted a wise man.

After pondering the question, the old man announced, “I don’t know if I can help you, but at least take my camel.” The sons now had 18 camels. The first son took his half of eighteen — that’s nine. The second son took his thirds of 18 - that’s six. The third son took his ninth — which was two. 9 and 6 and 2 made 17. They had one camel left over. They gave it back to the old man. Clever, huh?

Now why couldn’t Jesus had told *that* kind of story in our gospel today, where everyone is honorable and everything is above-board and ethical? Instead, Jesus tells this embarrassing story about a rascal who seems to make some shrewd but questionable dealings and is praised for it! Consult Biblical scholars for some insight and you will get little agreement. They can’t even agree on whether the Greek word used to describe the manager should be translated as *unjust* or *dishonest* and whether he is praised for being *prudent*, *wise* or *shrewd*. Some try to smooth over the shenanigans with the debtors by saying the manager wasn’t really cheating, just cutting out his commission or the master’s unjust scalping. Here is another Sunday when it’s VERY tempting to preach on the psalm and call it a day. But it’s also an opportunity for us to practice wandering around in God’s Word and wondering what it might be that Jesus is trying to teach.

A manager is called before his boss and fired based on “charges” that the manager has been squandering the landowner’s property. We don’t know if that means stealing, laziness or incompetence. We do not know if the charges are true or not. We do know the landowner wants his accounts and financial records. The good news for the manager is that

the landowner is not seeking to have him thrown in jail. The bad news is that he's out of a job, facing a drastic change in his social and financial status.

He quickly takes stock of his situation and comes up with a plan that will provide him some kind of stability, at least for a while. He approaches those who owe the master, reduces their debts, putting himself in their good graces. Then, when he's out of a job, he will turn to these grateful clients for some hospitality and assistance. It's clever, huh? Luckily, that's what the boss thought as well. "Now there's one brilliant move." What exactly does the master find good in the manager's actions?

After this story, Jesus tells us, "You cannot serve God and wealth." Luke notes, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him." Listening to this story, we are all caught in the drama of the manager's thoughts and actions. What we are likely to miss is the character of the master or rich man. Whatever else you may say, the Master is exceedingly generous. Whatever the manager was able to do was only possible because of the Master's generosity. First, he entrusted his property to the manager to administer on his behalf. When found wasteful, the Master gave the manager the time to put his affairs in order, rather than sending him off to prison in public disgrace. After the manager lowered those debts, the master, again, did not send him off to jail, but praised the good the manager accomplished. What good is that? There were people throughout the region spreading the word of how generous the master was to have his manager lower their debt.

The main point of the story isn't to teach us how to be dishonest or manipulate others for our own benefit. Instead, Jesus is asking us to consider --- Do we realize that all we are and all we have belong to a generous God who entrusts us to manage it? And do you and I use those treasures, time and talents in ways that lead others to celebrate the goodness of our Master?"¹ The manager somehow wasted the master's property that had been entrusted to his care. When generously given time to respond, "the manager

does not line his own pockets but spreads the blessings of the master throughout the community.”² This, the master declares, is a fine use of his generosity and property. Looking at the story through this lens, Jesus is telling us, his followers, that he expects us to grow in our knowing of the great generosity of our Lord, and then to make use of the property and treasure entrusted to us to generously spread God’s blessings throughout the world.

There was a make-believe country where only ducks lived. On Sunday morning, all the ducks came to church, waddled down the aisle, waddled into their pew and squatted. Then the duck minister came in, took his place behind the pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read, “Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the skies. Ducks! You have wings!” All the ducks quacked, “Amen!” and then they all waddled home. No one flew. ³

Maybe sometimes it takes some ducks to remind us God has given us gifts to be used and a world that needs them. Maybe it can take a shady, shrewd rascal to remind there’s no time to waste. We aren’t to squander God’s property but carry on the generous and life-giving ways of the Lord in whose image we are created. Maybe sometimes it takes a \$10,000 deficit to remind us that it’s God’s church, it’s God’s mission, it’s God’s work that we are privileged to share and to support with our offerings. And, trusting in the generosity of our Lord, we can make sacrifices and reorder our personal spending so God’s saving mission can fly rather than waddle, thrive rather than cower, expand rather than shrink.

Let us children of the light not forget ---- we followers of Jesus are out to change the world with kind words and compassionate ears, with our contributions of clothing, food and school supplies, with caring for one another, ever seeking ways to bring alive peace, justice and mercy and supporting a church community where we learn and teach and practice Christ’s ways for the love of God and neighbor. We are followers of Jesus

who fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish and a faith in God's goodness. We are followers of Jesus, who set in motion a movement that would change the world with men and women who were not the elite, the powerful or the scholarly but fishermen, a woman cured of demons and other simple folks who doubted they had what it would take ---- yet here we are, their descendants in faith thousands of years later.

The parable of the dishonest manager is still confusing, rich with possible interpretations. Today, we notice that what makes the manager dishonest is that he treats his master's property as if it is own. We are dishonest when we do not acknowledge that any and all that we have is God's, graciously entrusted to us to use for the benefit of God's mission, the good of our neighbor and a lifestyle that reflects the goodness and generosity of our Lord. Knowing it is God's means we do not give out of guilt. Knowing we have been saved by God's grace, we give in thanksgiving and gratitude what is God's in the first place. If that makes us a dishonest manager, well the Master is pleased. When we trust in God's promises and generosity, we can stop waddling and risk soaring on the winds of the Holy Spirit into holy possibilities that I believe God will bless. I ask you to believe that, too. Amen? **(Amen)**

Linda M. Alessandri 9/22/19

ENDNOTES

1..King Duncan, "Living with Pizzazz" Collected Sermons, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20 as posted at www.esermons.com

2.. Ibid

3... Jim Burns, Radically Committed (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991) repeated by King Duncan in his sermon, "Who Did He Praise?" www.esermons.com