

“Wrong Thing for the Right Reason”
15th Sunday after Pentecost – September 18 – Luke 16:1-13/C

Here is your morning riddle: What do these three things have in common? Reynolds Wrap, holiday wrappings and Ziploc bags. Anyone? OK, I'll tell you what they have in common. I save them. I save them, clean them/straighten and store them/wash them, and then use them over and over again – because my parents were Great Depression babies. That event affected *them* so deeply that *I* am still saving, storing and reusing because of what happened to them almost 100 years ago. My parents learned from theirs, and I learned from them what it means to, “*Waste not; Want not.*” And in a collective effort to not waste anything that might become useful, we gave wings to the Recycling movement.

The guy in today's story is known as either the Dishonest Manager or the Unjust Steward. Neither title is very flattering. His complicated story develops as a relatively simple plot line with three basic acts. Act 1. The Rich Man fires him for squandering. (The same word is used for the Prodigal Son, wasting, spending recklessly, mis-managing.) Act 2. He creates his “Back-up Plan.” (Plan B is saving his skin at the Rich Man's expense.) Act 3. Surprise! The Rich Man **commends** the dishonest manager for using resources that do not belong to him to wiggle out of a desperate situation! Even more surprising is that Jesus tells this story at all. Surprisingly, Jesus seems to condone the manager's as well, suggesting that his listeners might also model their actions after this unjust steward, and indicating that those who play in the world know world's rules, and it's okay to *work the system*. He lifts up the manager as an example for knowing what he wants (money, comfort, security) and having some creative ways to reach his goal. This manager knows what to do and he does what he must, to get himself where he wants to be. In other words, Jesus doesn't seem to have the same problem as we might with “*the end justifying the means.*”

But here's the really hard part, in verse 9: “*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.*” Did we hear that correctly? Did Jesus just tell us to manipulate ill-gotten gains for our benefit? Or to get us into heaven? Hardly. But what if we read it sarcastically? Then it makes a little more sense, as Jesus might be chiding them for “falling for” the ways of the world. Yet, we shouldn't forget that Jesus himself wasn't above creative thinking, often coloring outside the acceptable lines, crossing the cultural boundaries and stretching the traditional rules **way** beyond what his peers were comfortable with. Perhaps Jesus simply enjoys the idea of us being as “creative” in our faithfulness to God, as the manager was being in securing his unemployed future.

Let's take a closer look at the Dishonest Manager and his own Life-Changing Event. Right at the beginning of the story, he is fired. He is shocked, in disbelief, doesn't know what to do. But then comes the big idea, and he begins to wheel and deal like he's never “whelt and dealt” before. “*I'll show the Rich Man what I can do! And if that doesn't work, at least I'll have friends in high places!*”

Now, some say the Rich Man had padded the amounts of what was owed him, and that this guy was merely restoring the original amounts of money that were owed. That is an interesting thought. But regardless of that piece of information, what is at the heart of this tale is the manager's relationship to wealth. **It changes as a result of his misfortune.** Now he must think differently about his stewardship of money and debts. Now he will act for social, not financial gain. Now his stuff is of little importance, and relationships are key.

And Jesus (once again) chooses people over bookkeeping. The moral of this story might simply be that God loves us - not our production, or our skill set...just us. God loves **us**.

Lutheran theologian Rudolph Bultmann called this story, "The Problem Child of Parables" and you can see why. It would appear Jesus is reinterpreting, reframing his teaching for a particular audience...and, he's talking to the Pharisees, who might be stung by his characterization of their squandering of their calling. They would be listening intently to what he says. And we should be as well. But, this story has too many ways to interpret who is good and who is bad - too many twists and not enough advice. And with the disciples, it makes us wonder, "*Why doesn't Jesus just speak plainly? Whose side is he on? (But of course, we already know the answer to that question...)*"

Isn't it just like God **not** to fit neatly into a box we could mark, "Things Jesus said that I understand." (It's almost as if God knows us well enough to know how we think everything is about us.) But God also knows we have the capability of figuring things out, and so God asks us to unknot the story's riddle, to dig into the Scripture and define the words - to answer our questions and to bring new ones to the conversation. In other words, use your brain! And LEARN - make a plan - be as creative about your faith as you are about your business... Don't let a little thing like "not wanting to impose on someone" be the excuse for not sharing what God has done in your life! Don't hold back the good news that keeps you hopeful in times of incredible difficulty, especially when a friend is experiencing times of incredible difficulty! Don't forget that God is present and that your strength to persevere does not appear because you are such a good disciple, but because God is your rock and your salvation...and knows you better than you know yourself.

God knows how we are drawn to the power of wealth, as we succumb to the allegiance that money demands. But talking about money in church is the Last Taboo. We usually only talk about money when we are asking for pledges or tell you that offerings have fallen short. But we should talk about *how hard it is to talk about it*. For instance, shouldn't we know what having money means to us? Shouldn't we be able to distinguish between the advantages we have to earn and the situations which have stymied others' capability to provide for themselves through honest work and acceptable wages? Perhaps we should ask why our teeshirts don't say God's Work. Our \$, while we teach our kids what to do with money, and how to live with what we have. Maybe we should talk among ourselves about how to live well with less, and how not to squander what we have, and then share ideas and plans for how to lift up our neighbors who don't have enough, especially when we do.

You know, Jesus is pretty clear about how God thinks about wealth, and he talked about it all the time. In fact, Jesus talked about money more than any other topic except the Kingdom of God. So, if we think the church shouldn't be talking about money, we simply aren't being faithful to the example of Jesus. And following Jesus is hard. This story also points to the reason **why** it is so hard. For 400 years, the American church has survived by telling you that you CAN love God and money at the same time...while the bottom line of Jesus' message is you cannot: *You cannot serve two masters - you'll either hate one and love the other; or be devoted to one and despise the other. **You cannot serve God and money.***"

Now there is nothing wrong with money - it is a tool to take care of those in need. But 1Timothy 6.10, often misquoted, says: "**the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil; in eagerness to be rich some have wandered away (and hurt themselves.)**" Just like the Prodigal Son wandered from home - and suffered. Just like the Manager forgot - the wealthy were

bound to provide for poor. Our wealth (our money and possessions) comes to us first from God, and we are to use it wisely. It is a gift, and we are to learn to use this gift the same way we use any of the other spiritual resources we have been given: for the building up of the body of Christ, and in service to the world that God loves. This might mean we may have to humble ourselves and give value to some who we hadn't considered worthy when everything was going our way.

Finally, let me return to the Parable for a moment and offer this suggestion: What if this God-inspired tale is told simply to turn a plot upside down, so we can see the Unjust Steward as the God figure? The Rich Man has asked *us* to account for our stewardship of his wealth. We hem, we haw, we make excuses. Then, desperate to appease him, we try to make a plan that will get us right with the Rich Man, and ultimately into heaven. We wheel and deal, we plead and bargain, but no matter how we try to arrange things to our advantage, we fail...

And that is when Jesus steps in for us – he loses his job and his identity (he dies); and then makes a new plan (rises again.) Then, he reaches out to those in debt to his Father, and makes any and every kind of deal that we might want to make; saving not just our paltry riches, but our very lives as well. And we are reconciled...returned to God. To that I'd say, "Well played, Jesus. Well played." Amen.

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Resources: Robert Farrar Capon [The Parables of Grace](#); "The Last Taboo" 9.22.13; Sermon Brainwave/Working Preacher; Faith Lens; Phyllis Tickle, WeAreSparkHouse;