

Blessed be God who animates our lives and welcomes all of us sinners, squanderers, into the kingdom when we value relationship over resources. AMEN

A parishioner from my former church and member of my Bible study there wrote me this past week that she had heard a wonderful theory of the empty tomb: clothes folded and a kind of pristine emptiness was a traditional sign that Jesus' job on earth was done. While I was thrilled with her excitement I also indicated that it continued to fascinate me that we humans look for all too tidy answers to a mystery which defies all logic.

And so we come today to one of the most difficult of all Luke's passages and bizarre of Jesus' parables. Logic applied to it often renders the message one outside Christian tenets of love and obedience to a higher power. Yet, I have come to wonder this week whether this story is just so human and instead of leading us to the endgame it situates us in the middle of a human struggle which so long as we are persistent toward the Kingdom in good faith then Jesus is not only with us but supports us. We do not become fully formed Christians in one fell swoop. This process of salvation concerns all humanity, all creation.

Today we hear of a dishonest manager who has been caught by his rich employer "squandering" the rich man's resources. After rejecting his options he makes a "shrewd" deal with the debtors to reduce what they owed the rich man, thereby securing favor with these debtors. Jesus commends his shrewd action.

Perhaps the message in this parable coupled with the familiar admonitions about loving God more than money is that while it can appear in all different ways and at all different stages in life, whenever we turn, reorder our lives in such a way as to benefit the less fortunate, we receive God's favor. However shrewdly, whatever squandered, we are kingdom people when we help the needy.

Some questions to consider:

Is it possible that we could shrewdly squander our way into heaven?

To ask the question that way feeds the confusion of this parable from Luke. It places our value judgements on the story and conclusion which Jesus seems to offer. and it does so because we have come to use words like squander and shrewd pejoratively, negatively. But in its countercultural way, Luke might be using words which in his time held more positive meaning. Squander meant scatter, distribute. (sometimes illegal, sometimes legal) Shrewd was a synonym for wise.

Scattering and wisdom are gospel terms which call us to remember growing faith and obedient to God choices.

Scattering and wisdom, squandering and shrewdness, might be the tools of Kingdom building.

So what is a parable?

A parable is a grassroots lesson story connecting the ordinariness of life with the extraordinariness of God. In accomplishing this connection and shedding a light on the Kingdom of God, one must hold lightly previously assumed notions of behavior and worship and instead try on some radical ideas, God's ideas. The result is a subversive, inside out, upside down, perspective. The first shall be last, death results in life, etc..

It is into this sacred story form that we turn to make sense of a bad manager! the main character of this God lesson seems to have failed entirely to live a godly life. But I remind myself that however interpreted, the parable must point us to the Kingdom and further Jesus' work on earth.

The parable positioned as it is after the prodigal son, after the lost and found stories, must say something about the Kingdom and entry thereto, something about the difference between God's economy and ours, something about stewardship of gifts, and something about letting go, surrendering, et.

And perhaps most importantly something about HOME, our eternal one.

A man once caught stealing was ordered by the king to be hanged. On the way to the gallows, he said to the governor that he knew a wonderful secret and it would be a pity to allow it to die with him and he would like to disclose it to the king. He would put a seed of a pomegranate in the ground and through the secret taught to him by his father, he would make it grow and bear fruit overnight. The thief was brought before the king and on the morrow the king, accompanied by the high officers of state, came to the place where the thief was waiting for them. There the thief dug a hole and said, "This seed must only be put in the ground by a man who has never stolen or taken anything which did not belong to him. I being a thief cannot do it."

So he turned to the governor who, frightened, said that in his younger days he had retained something which did not belong to him. The treasurer said that dealing with such large sums, he might have entered too much or too little, and even the king owned that he had kept a necklace of his father's. The thief then said, "You are all mighty and powerful and want nothing and yet you cannot plant the seed, whilst I who have stolen a little because I was starving am to be hanged."

The king, pleased with the ruse of the thief, pardoned him.

No one is without sin, even the mighty and powerful. Something greater is at work. There is a virtue to exposing even by trickery this universal truth.

Slowly I find myself relaxing into the parable and opening myself to a message which I know will both turn ordinary expectations upside down but also offer extraordinary opportunities.

there is a saying from the Zohar that only a broken heart may be made whole this is certainly consistent with many philosophies which in different ways hold that through the cracks and breaks and fractures of our lives forgiveness, love and mercy may flow and restore

It seems to me that so it is with Christianity. Our two great commandments to love God, ourselves and other are formulae for circulating healing restorative and reparative love through all creation. It is not a stretch to imagine this flooding love filling the cracks and fissures of earthly lives.

the manager had hit bottom, he saw no way out of his dilemma, he was in crisis, perhaps he used his cunning and his shrewdness to reposition himself in thought and prayer and evaluate his choices differently. he was broken. perhaps God's light had filled his emptiness.

perhaps his squandering had led him to such a point that reducing other's debt was a better way to use resources. perhaps in reducing other's debt he was building relationships, instead of material wealth.

Jesus encourages his listeners to imitate the mans' scattering of wealth in order to receive the gift that is beyond return and outside any economy of exchange - an eternal tenting in which one is received not into a settled domain but into a triune life that is eternally on the move.

When I get confused like I have been with the parable of the shrewd manager, I go back to basics, much like we did with the word hate, and I console my confusion with the reminder that no matter what all parables enhance the ethic of love.

After all, the ending of our story which is without end, tells of a thief who died in the same manner as our Lord yet was assured of entry into Paradise. So why wouldn't a squandering manager who shrewdly helped others who valued relationship over resource also be welcomed home.

Remember the thief on the cross next to Jesus, he reminds us all that we too are sinners, we too will be received into heaven, to our eternal home after a crucifixion. Perhaps this shrewd scattering squandering manager had come to his cross as well. Perhaps by creating relationships with resources he had done something wise in bringing about the kingdom.

Perhaps this parable confusing as it is, ending as it does with typical Lukan economic ethical principles...is yet another reminder of the fact that we live on this earth, with all the earthly resources gifted and in being good stewards we are to keep our eye on the Kingdom. We are to remember that in the end, we are all going to be together, the

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owner, the manager and the debtors; the king the thief and the servants; the rich the poor the oppressed; the faithful and the sinners.

there is a wideness in God's mercy; there is a larger reality toward which we journey.

May we be shrewd /meaning wise /in our dealings with each other and especially with the less privileged. May we squander love and scatter affection. May we in so doing assist God in bringing about the Kingdom where no one, not one, will be judged inept or guilty but all will share in the abundance which is unfathomable and beyond measure and incapable of being misused.

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MT: it doesn't matter so much whether the master is god and the manager is us; what matters is that there is an inversion, a subversion of earthly expectations and agency in favor of God's economy of relationships and welcome

instead of shame and grace, doors will be opened and drinks will be offered  
our eternal homes

what if instead of trying to figure out what Jesus actually means in this week's parable, we took its interpretation to another level to the kingdom of God the he is always pointing toward

in this Kingdom all the biblical characters will be gathered, rich man the shady manager the debtors Moses, Jacob, Sarah, Hagar, Lazarus and Abraham, prodigal son, rich young ruler, persistent door knocker, lamenting psalmist, praising psalmist, the wheelers and dealers whom Amos scorned, the newly faithful, the disciples, those whom Timothy calls, and the thief on the cross

When looked at this way the story in all its variousness is yet another example of drawing all our earthly perspectives ultimately into a gracious abundant whole.

When looked at this way the story is another one of our journeys from lost to found, from death into life, from wilderness into heaven

The manager has hit bottom and at least turned and my guess it turned toward God, otherwise it would not be a parable..

economic realities and relational realities

another how much more parable and the realization that relationships are more important, more eternal than money

Robin Hood esque

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all Lukes parables of lost and found, rich and poor, point us toward the radically different yet holy path of trust in God and obedience to God's will

In this story as in the parable of the dishonest steward the central character is accused of stealing and by shrewd actions wins a pardon or commendation from the master. The parable does not unmask the dishonesty of the master or expose him to ridicule. Instead, the parable turns on the steward's shrewd response to the urgency of his situation and invites hearers to understand that they are likewise in the midst of a crisis that demands an urgent decision if disaster is to be avoided. Faced with loss of his position the dishonest steward acted decisively to provide for his future. One who hears the gospel knows that just such a decisive act is required of those who will stake their all on the coming Kingdom of God.

Christians are to be faithful whether we deal in little things or vast resources whether we are as shrewd as a dishonest steward depends on whether we use our material good great or small to help those in need (whatever you for the least of these...) Then when we worship God rather than our wealth, we will find that we truly have "friends in high places"