

TAKING STOCK AND TAKING ACTION

September 22, 2019

Luke 16: 1-13

As I read today's parable, the first thing that jumped out at me was that it took the crisis of getting fired to get the manager to take a good hard look at his life. In the beginning, the manager had been using money to enrich himself. But after he was fired, he shifted gears and began to use money in a way that enriched others and established relationships of mutual benefit.

It reminds me of the story about the worker who kept refusing to give to the United Way drive, until finally, the boss said, "Either you make a contribution or you are fired." The very next day, the worker made a large pledge. When asked what caused the change of heart, the worker replied, "I just never heard the reason why I should contribute explained so clearly before!"

Why do we wait until we are faced with a crisis to take a good look at our lives and get moving? A less than desirable medical prognosis pushes us to think about working our way through the old bucket list. An evacuation order forces us to quickly decide what is most important to take with us.

The challenge Jesus presents us in today's parable is to discern deeply and clearly who we are and what we are supposed to be doing. If everything was taken away, what would we do, who would we be, where would we go? My friends, being a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ is not about having comfort and wealth. It is not about conforming to what everybody else does. It is about transforming in the way of the Lord. For the most part, Christians are far too passive. Our goal is to be good and proper lest we offend others. We want to follow the rules and make sure we don't make mistakes. But, is that the goal of the kingdom? Is that the way of Christ? No wonder, the lights are going out in churches!

Remember Soren Kierkegaard's "Duck story?" The ducks waddled to church, a duck church, to sing duck songs and hear their duck pastor read from the duck Bible. The duck pastor preached to the ducks, saying, "You ducks waddled to church. But you have wings, you were made to fly, to soar to the heavens, no limits to your soaring and flying, nothing can stop you. So fly and claim your identity." And at the conclusion of the sermon, all the ducks proclaimed "Amen" and then waddled home.

Of course, God desires ethical behavior but God also seems to delight in pro-active and imaginative action. Tom Long claims that one challenging insight we can glean from the parable is when Jesus says, in essence, "I wish the children of light, I wish the people of God, I wish the ministers and members of the church were as shrewd for the gospel as the wheeler-dealers out there in the world are shrewd for themselves." In other words, there are people who get up every morning determined to figure out how to maximize the profit for their shareholders, focusing every ounce of their energy to make more money for themselves, working in overdrive to keep moving up and up and up the corporate ladder. Jesus says, "I wish disciples would be just as determined, focused, and energetic for building up the Body of Christ, for participating in God's building of the beloved community, as they are in building up their business or careers." Long claims that this conclusion might be one reason why Jesus tells the story; to help us disciples think more shrewdly about where we focus and what drives us. It is time to ask ourselves, into what and for what do we pour out most of our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

In the English translation, the parable says the manager was dishonest. The original Greek word reminds us that the basic meaning of the word dishonest is unjust. You see, dishonesty is a lack of justice. The manager was not breaking a single law, but he was unjust. He was within the

law, but the law was shaped to rip people off legally. The economic system of the rich man and the manager was fundamentally unjust. And it still is.

My friends, if we are not living for the justice of God; if we are not committed to a life and a purpose which is seeking to enable all people to live fully and be treated respectfully, then, by definition, we are serving mammon, our own material well-being, and not God. And, let's acknowledge that our behavior is both definitive and formative. Our actions define who we are. And, as Jesus said, when we are dishonest in little things it shows that we will be dishonest and unjust in bigger things. And, our behavior is also formative. Little dishonesties prepare us, train us, for bigger dishonesties. A little hardness of heart prepares us for closing our eyes to greater injustices. But, what hope have we got in a country which is so obscenely rich and so spiritually bereft?

Well, Jesus doesn't say the opposite of dishonest and unjust, is, first of all, to be honest and just. Jesus contrasted being unjust with being faithful. A little faithfulness shows that we will be faithful with bigger things. And a little faithfulness frees us toward being even more faithful. My friends, please don't limit your understanding of faith to signing off on a list of doctrinal statements about Jesus. Faith is so much more. It begins by trusting that what God calls good and what God calls just and what God calls kingdom is the thing to which we trust our lives. Not the American Way of over consumption and accumulation.

This morning, we are offered a parable that has stumped believers throughout the ages. But, you know, there is something comforting in finding a bible story as messy as our world and our lives, because we can be assured that as messy as our own lives become, there is biblical evidence that God is in the midst of the mess. That's part of the wisdom of this passage. But there is also more.

It's my hunch that, for many of us, if the story and its interpretation were to stop there, that we would be dissatisfied, because we've come to expect more from the Bible. We have come to expect that God's Word will not only relate to the messiness of life in this world, but that it will somehow call us out of, above, and beyond the mess of life. Some of us may feel anxious that the mess we see before us on most days is as good as it gets. And we would be deeply disappointed if that turned out to be true.

Biblical commentator Helen Debevoise spoke to this anxiety. She wrote, "Somewhere in the middle of our journey we stopped living for Christ. We stopped believing that Jesus died and was resurrected and that life was made new. Somewhere along the way it became easy to serve all those pressing demands: of people, of schedule, of money. Somewhere along the way, the vision for God's call became cloudy and muddled. We stopped hearing God's voice and joined the crazy survivor-takes-all mentality. Somewhere along the way, the challenges seemed so much bigger than the answers. So we huddled in an effort to save whatever was left and forgot about living for something greater."

My friends, the self-centered, huddled life of the manager is not enough for us and we know it. So Jesus gives voice to the idea that we want something greater. Jesus reminds us of what we know deep inside. He tells a parable and then turns to his disciples, shakes his head, and says, "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and hate the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." We all know this is our higher calling. Deep within us we want to know that God understands the messiness of our world but we also want to be called above and beyond the mess to strive for something better, something greater. Maybe the truth behind the parable is that no matter how far gone things have become, we all still seem to know, deep inside, the difference between what feels right and what feels wrong

and we long for more of the good. My friends, that's God being real for us in our real world. And that's the fresh breath of the Spirit calling us to a better and fuller life as we become more determined, focused, and energetic for building up the Body of Christ and for participating in God's building of the beloved community here and now. Amen