

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 22, 2013

"For the Love of...what?"

Luke 16:1-13

Another story from the book *No More Dreaded Mondays* tell a delightful story about a farmer many years ago in a village in India who had the misfortune of owing a large sum of money to the village money lender. The old and ugly money lender fancied the farmer's beautiful daughter, so he proposed a bargain. He would forgive the farmer's debt if he could marry the farmer's daughter.

Both the farmer and his daughter were horrified by the proposal, but the cunning money lender suggested that they let providence decide the matter. He told them that he would put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty money bag. The girl would have to reach in and pick one pebble from the bag. If she picked the black pebble, she would become his wife and her father's debt would be forgiven. If she picked the white pebble, she need not to marry him and her father's debt would still be forgiven. If she refused to pick a pebble, her father would be thrown into jail until the debt was paid.

They were standing on a pebble-strewn path in the farmer's field. As they talked, the money lender bent over to pick two pebbles. The sharp-eyed girl noticed that he had picked up two black pebbles and put them into the bag. He then asked the girl to pick a pebble. Now, imagine that you were the girl standing in the field. What would you have done? If you had to advise her, what would you have told her?

There are at least three possibilities that I can see. (1) the girl could refuse to take a pebble but her father would then be thrown in jail. (2) the girl could pick a black pebble and sacrifice herself in order to save her father from debt and imprisonment. Or (3) the girl could pull out the two black pebbles in the bag, expose the money lender as a cheat, and likely fuel his immediate revenge.

Here is what the girl did. She put her hand into the money bag and pulled out a pebble. Without looking at it, she fumbled and let it fall onto the pebble-strewn path, where it immediately became lost among all the other pebbles. "Oh how clumsy of me," she said. "But never mind, if you look into the bag for the one that is left, you will be able to tell which one I picked." Since the remaining pebble was black, it would have to be assumed that she had picked the white one. And since the money lender dared not to admit his dishonesty, the girl would have changed what seemed an impossible situation into an extremely advantageous one.

Don't we all love stories where the good guy uses his or her wit and cunning to defeat a villain? It may disturb us when the villain uses that same wit and cunning. And Jesus told his disciples a parable about a dishonest man who did just that.

Remember that a parable is a story that has just one point. Well, I am not sure... Jesus told many parables, many of them designed to disturb those who heard them. There parables were designed to get people to think outside the box of their upbringing. That's hard for most people to do. It's much easier to view life as you've always been taught.

In this case, Jesus told a parable about a rich man who had a manager who was accused of wasting the rich man's possessions. So he called him in and asked him, "What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer." Now this is understandable. The guy has been loose with his boss' money. So the boss has no choice but to give him a pink slip, but, evidently he doesn't fire him at once.

Do you remember when employers gave their employees two week's notice before firing them? That day's gone. In today's corporate environment, the employer is more apt to approach an unsuspecting employee about 4:00 p.m. on Friday afternoon and instruct the fired employee to clean out his desk immediately, turn in his company credit card and office keys, and then have security walk him to the elevator where he would be told never to come back.

Ah yes, the good old days... of course, today's employers would argue that there are good reasons for this change in policy as some employees can't be trusted. They could do lasting damage to the company if they were allowed to stay on the job and have access to company assets. And that's exactly what the dishonest manager did. This unscrupulous manager was being dishonest, of course, but he was making sure that he would have some friends who would be indebted to him when he no longer had a job.

Now for the shocker: Jesus concludes this parable by having the manager's boss praise him because he acted so shrewdly. That's very troubling to many people. Jesus seems to be giving approval to a shady character. This parable has been troubling to people ever since Jesus told it. A fact that has probably given the Lord a chuckle over the centuries. After all, Jesus often seemed to have a twinkle in his eye when he told his stories. He knew they were upsetting.

Theologians have puzzled long over this parable. Preachers have puzzled over it. What do you think the Lord was trying to do with this parable?

A popular explanation today is that this is chiefly a parable about forgiveness. Jesus was praising the dishonest manager for forgiving his boss' debtors. And this makes some sense. After all, Jesus was all about forgiveness and grace. This parable comes right after the story of the prodigal who came home and was graciously welcomed and forgiven by his father even though he had acted disrespectfully toward his father as well as irresponsibly in squandering his inheritance. Yet the father, much to the dismay of some of Jesus' listeners, welcomed the boy home unconditionally. Such is the extravagant forgiveness and grace that Christ has made possible for us. That is one interpretation of this parable. God's forgiveness is extravagant.

And the message of God's grace does meet our deepest need, and it's one possible explanation of why Jesus would praise the dishonest manager. He forgave his master's debtors. Even for the wrong reason.

Another possible explanation is that this is a parable about money. Luke seems to interpret the parable in this way, for he attaches some of Jesus, other teachings about money right after this parable. "I Tell you," Jesus says, "use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

This explanation has its appeal. Jesus had more to say about money than any other topic, particularly in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus warned time after time about the dangers of riches. And we know it's true we cannot serve God and money. Money may be our number one obsession. So it makes sense that this was one more of Jesus' warnings about the danger of loving money.

There is a third alternative that we need to consider. Perhaps Jesus actually was praising the man for doing something about his situation. Notice how Jesus ends this parable. In verse eight we read, "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the

people of this world are more shrewdly in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light." Jesus was not praising his dishonesty, but his ingenuity and his initiative. That's the plain meaning of this parable. This man took hold of his life and got himself out of a tight situation. He didn't sit around beating on himself saying, "What shall I do? What shall I do?" He didn't spend all his time on his knees praying, "O Lord, please get me out of this." Jesus was praising this man for getting into immediate action.

Jesus had little sympathy for persons who always expected God to do things for them that they were perfectly capable of handling themselves. Remember to whom Jesus was directing this parable. It was to his disciples. It wasn't to the Pharisees or the multitudes. He was speaking to those closest to him. I think he was saying, "Look, guys, I know you are nice people, and that's well and good, but I need you to be more than nice. I need for you to get out there and make a difference in the world. You're going to be called trouble-makers, and radicals and every other name in the book. That's all right because you are going to be turning the world on its head."

I believe that's what Jesus is saying to his church even today. O.K., were nice people. Jesus likes nice people. But what Jesus really appreciates are people who are making a difference.

Jesus was not commending this manager for his deceit. He was commending him for his concern about the future and his dedication and energy. The manager was sold out to pursuing a goal, and that's what Christ needs from us. He needs us to be sold out to righteousness and justice and love and peace. He needs us to be sold out to changing the world.

It's a strange little parable. Maybe it is a call to radical forgiveness. Maybe it is one more of Jesus' warnings about the corruptive power of money. Or maybe, just maybe, it is a summons to those who follow Jesus to step it up a bit and to sell out for serving him. Amen.