

Sunday, September 18, 2016  
Psalm 79; Luke 16

Lois Harder

### The Parable of the Manager...dishonest, shrewd or justice seeker?

Maybe you're familiar with the adage, "When you're a hammer, every situation looks like a nail." I could understand it if you're thinking something along those lines right now in reference to this passage and the sermon title. We've just heard a story about a smarmy manager who ripped off his boss to save his own skin – and then the boss congratulates him! Seems like a bit of a stretch to call him a "justice seeker" and I can imagine some of you might be thinking, "Oh boy... here we go again – another sermon from Lois about justice...", but I invite you to try to stay with me here. I'll try to make some sense of my hammering away at the justice seeking mantra! The three points I want to make all have to do with context.

First, we need to read the story in the context of its placement in Luke's gospel. It comes directly on the heels of the three parables of the lost... the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost (and prodigal) child. In fact, the manager has some things in common with the prodigal. The same words were even used about both of them – they "squandered property" that did not belong to them! And both of them were shown extravagant mercy.

These stories were told in the presence and hearing of the Pharisees and the scribes – the folks who were deeply concerned about the immoral and unethical behavior of, well, of everyone! At the beginning of chapter 15 they were concerned about Jesus because he was welcoming sinners and eating with them! In the stories that Luke told about Jesus, the Pharisees were unnerved because the prodigal son as well as the dishonest manager were immoral and unethical – and yet they were forgiven and commended. So... are Luke's stories meant to be about the prodigal son and the dishonest manager? Probably, at least in part. But it seems they're also meant to call attention to the Pharisees and the rich man – the ones who worked so hard to maintain the systems that protected their wealth and power. The fuss about the morals and the ethics of the prodigal and the manager was a perfect veil for their own unethical behavior as they built their wealth on the backs of those who could never repay their debts.

Early on in Luke's gospel, chapter 4, Jesus proclaims his calling – to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, freedom for the oppressed. And in chapter 11 he teaches his followers to pray, "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us".

All the way through Luke's gospel, he's showing us that Jesus knew all about power brokers, absentee lenders charging exorbitant interest rates, politicians veiling their own peccadillos by harping ceaselessly about the sins of others. Jesus knew all about powerful corporations stealing and abusing the land out from under those buried under it and living on it. He understood payday lending scams that put the final nails in the coffin of those to whom they lend.

When we read this story in the context of Luke's gospel we see Jesus himself as pretty darn shrewd and clever and wise, challenging the powers and principalities, advocating for the lost and the least, all the time using his wit and his nerve, nonviolently, brilliantly, shrewdly bringing to the light the injustices that live and thrive in the darkness.

My second point is that we need to read this story – and all stories about Jesus – in the context of the whole Bible. It's important to recognize that Jesus is behaving in ways that are consistent with what we already know of God's nature. He was incarnating the characteristics of God – one of which is being clever and shrewd! Throughout the Bible, Yahweh is a God who acts in surprising ways to bring peace with justice, for ALL creation! God uses what are often considered the *least* likely people and situations to bring goodness and justice to the world. In the Old Testament, we read stories of God using prostitutes and outcasts to rescue and to teach. God used foreign women and slaves to bring proud kings down from their hubris. We read stories of a God who is full of surprises and who shows up in unexpected ways. God extends mercy and forgiveness and reaches out to humanity time and time again in spite of their turning away from God.

It was shrewd of God to confound the people's language as they were building the tower of Babel. It was clever of God to put a bush that was burning but not being consumed in front of Moses as he was out with the sheep. And how 'bout those plagues for the Pharaoh!

God certainly did surprise everyone when he used women like Ruth and Esther to see his purposes through. And when the people demanded a king so that they could be like the nations around them, God wisely consented and then grieved with them and let them suffer their own consequences when their kings messed things up. Perhaps one of God's most shrewd moves was acting through the prophets. The prophets presented God's messages to the people in surprising, creative, wise and wacky ways. How clever of God to use these strangely gifted people to be God's messengers!

And Jesus fell right into line – as God's most powerful mouthpiece, carrying on and expanding God's calls for peace with justice.

Third, and finally, we need to understand this story of the dishonest, shrewd, wise manager in the context of the lectionary readings. The only other one we read this morning was the Psalm. But the other two readings were from Jeremiah and I Timothy – a strange combination, but the common thread (which we talked about at Bible study on Wednesday evening) was prayer. The only way for us to possibly follow Jesus' examples is if we steep ourselves in prayer – like he did. Jeremiah 8 and Psalm 79 are similar prayers of lament, weeping for the pain of the people, begging for God's balm and mercy. I Timothy 2 is a tutorial – instructing Timothy in doing ministry. The instructions are simple. Pray, pray, pray!

When we read the parable of the dishonest manager in the context of these other lectionary readings, we can hear Jesus' reminder, again, as it's recorded in Matthew – to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves”. Use your heads. Be clever. Be shrewd. Invest yourselves carefully – your time, your money, your relationships. And pray. And live your prayers with integrity. I end with a wonderful quote from Frederick Douglass who said, “I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs.” Our hymn of response is “God of the Bible”, number 27 in the SJ.