

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Shrewdly

Sermon Reflection Notes

This week's scripture lesson, Luke 16:1-13, is a strange little story that doesn't seem to fit into our understanding of Jesus' teachings. It begins with Jesus telling a parable about a guy who is about to lose his job because his boss has heard that he was 'squandering his property.' And of course, the guy is scrambling about, trying to figure out a way out of this mess he's created. As he takes stock of his options, he realizes that he's never going to be able to do manual labor and he's too proud to beg in the streets, so he does the only thing he knows how to do: he squanders some more of his boss's property in order to collect some favors to fall back on in the future. To confuse us more, the story continues with the boss praising the guy's shrewdness and letting him keep his job! What is this story that Jesus tells and what are we supposed to take away from it?

Pastor Ron said we may have been expecting him to do a little biblical slight of hand and interpret this story in a way that makes it 'fit' with the other teachings of Jesus. He said he tried, that he and Pastor Andy even looked at the Greek to see if this doesn't mean what we think it means, only to discover the story is actually worse in Greek. This is the scripture we get; this is the story Jesus told, and Jesus always surprises us.

Jesus may have more important things to do than make sure we are better people living blameless lives. He may not want to wait for us to be perfect before he surprises us and loves the outsider and redeems the corrupt and finds beauty in all the messiest places.

Perhaps, Pastor Ron suggested, the real problem we have with this story is that we aren't the heroes. The children of the light, the ones who follow the rules and do the right thing and seek to live a faithful, good life, aren't the ones in this story who receive the reward. The children of the world do, the ones who have shady urges and secret habits and do things they shouldn't do when others aren't looking. We want to be good and right, but we recognize that in many ways, money does make the world go 'round. Jesus knew money had power after all; he was dependent upon the generosity of others for a meal, a bed, even a tomb. He needed what others had, even though he said the only way to be prudent with money is to give it away.

Maybe like Pastor Ron, we just don't get this story. We don't understand why Jesus is praising a con man. But isn't it just like Jesus to love someone sinful, to get mixed up in someone's shady business and show grace and love before he/she figures out how to live a good life? Jesus isn't encouraging us to steal. Maybe he's just reminding us that shedding the pretense of always being a child of the light and acknowledging that we are often children of the world doesn't keep us from God's love. And couldn't we all use a shrewd friend or two?

Scripture

Luke 16:1-13 (NRSVUE)

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management because you cannot be my manager any longer.' ³ Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' ⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' ⁷ Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' ⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly, for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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.

¹⁰ "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹ If, then, you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³ 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 despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

Discussion Questions

1. This parable is troublesome for us because it's hard and uncomfortable to think about. So, let's start with a basic comprehension question: What is the manager being praised for in this story? What is not being lifted up as admirable?

2. Listen to this story:

"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 Vizier 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." (*Jewish folk story as shared by rabbis*)

- What is the 'lesson' or moral of this story about another trickster? What other stories do we know that are similar, both from the Bible and from folktales/legends?

3. How do these other 'trickster' stories help us begin to make sense of the parable Jesus told in this week's scripture lesson?
4. Pastor Ron said: "Maybe, just maybe, Jesus has more important things to do than make sure we are going to be better people. Maybe, Jesus is not going to wait for you or me to be a better person before he starts surprising us and loving the outsider and redeeming the corrupt and finding beauty in all the messiest of ways." What does this mean?
5. What is the bottom line when it comes to this story, whether we understand it or not?

Closing Prayer

Your word is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path, O God, and yet we have to "squint" sometimes to try to make sense of the scripture text before us. But even today, we give thanks for the parable of the dishonest steward, and for those ancient ancestors who told, retold, and preserved this story. We thank you for a place where together we can wrestle with the text – a place where we can discover the nuggets of truth for our own living as disciples of Jesus. Help us to take this text with us this coming week and give us the wisdom to be shrewd disciples in ways that are faithful. We pray in the name of Jesus, who told this story. Amen.

"Isn't it just like Jesus to love someone sinful...like us?"