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St. James', Mt. Airy
9/18/16

Proper 20C
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Psalm 79:1-9
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Making sense of today's parable is a Herculean effort, so I hope you'll stick with me as we try to unpack it a little bit this morning.

Let's start with what's the parable, and what's the follow up teaching in this passage? Here, more than most times, it's difficult to see where the parable story itself ends and where Jesus' gloss begins.

The consensus of scholars is that the parable ends somewhere in verse 8, probably with the first half of the sentence, "*And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.*"

The teaching, then, picks up with the second part of the sentence – "*For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.*" – and is followed by several loosely connected sayings.

In fact, we might explain the tensions in the whole passage by imagining the writer of Luke’s Gospel sitting down at a desk with a big pile of ‘sayings of Jesus’ note cards, and adding one maxim after another to this parable based on loose thematic or semantic connections to money and responsibility.¹ This stuff is good – you have to fit it in somewhere!

However it is this passage came together, we still need to make sense of it theologically, morally, and practically – what in this story can we apply to how we live as followers of Christ?

Let’s pull it apart a bit.

The scripture passage that immediately precedes today’s reading is the story of the prodigal son. There are parallels between that story and today’s. In both parables a subordinate (child/steward) who “squanders” the goods of a superior (father/rich landlord) is, in the end, received back and celebrated/commended.²

However, the steward, unlike the son, was not penitent (though they both had self-interest as a motivation); and while the son was forgiven, the rich landlord did not offer forgiveness, but rather only commended the steward’s shrewdness.

As a morality play the prodigal son works. The dishonest steward? Not so much.

¹ Scott Bader-Saye, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

² Scott Bader-Saye, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

After being released for squandering the landlord's money, the steward went on to squander more. He disseminated the rich man's portfolio in order to protect his own future and secure a home when he cut deals with those who owed the landlord.

He trusted in wealth to shelter him in the future, and so through his gifts to the debtors, he sought not to free them from debt, but rather to indebt them to **him**.

Which is why it is so surprising when we hear Jesus praise him and commend our imitation of him. What exactly about the unjust steward are we to imitate?

We have to go deeper.

At its heart, this parable uncovers the pervasiveness of our love of money and the power we give it, because that hasn't changed between Jesus' time and our own. One way to read this parable, then, is to reflect on the connection between resources and relationships.

The manager's motivation in reducing the amount the landlord's debtors owed was to make friends so that when he was unemployed, someone would take him in. Jesus didn't commend his **practices**, but rather his **insight into the connection between resources (in this case money) and relationships**.³

Jesus' directive to imitate this, then, invites us to ask some hard questions.

³ G. Penny Nixon, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

What means do we employ to accomplish good ends?

What are our motivations behind the relationships we forge, and how are those relationships economically determined?

How are our relationships shaped by class issues?⁴

Money and class, along with race, are two of the hardest things for us to talk honestly about in America. And yet we have a Gospel that says you cannot serve God and wealth⁵ and that whatever we do to the least of these we do to God⁶.

And so it is that over and over again, Jesus shows us that our relationship to money, to each other, and to God are a part of our spiritual life – and our spiritual health.

We have to be able to talk about God and money if we are to live in faithful ways that lead us to drop the illusion that wealth gives us security and stability – and instead cultivate faith in the One who provides true riches and unfailing treasure in heaven.

I encourage you to take some time this week to reflect on this topic, perhaps sketch out a spiritual autobiography of money for your life, and in particular I invite you to our Fall adult formation series which begins in two weeks on Sunday, October 2nd after the 10:30 service. We will be using a program called *Talking About God and Money*, which is a series of six conversations that will invite us gently into the important work of uncovering our relationship with money and where God is found in that relationship.

⁴ G. Penny Nixon, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

⁵ Luke 16:13b

⁶ Matthew 25:40, 45

Our conversations will be wrapped in prayer and scripture, as well as personal reflection on the weekly topics of: wealth, God's covenant, laborers in the Kingdom of God, investing in the Kingdom of God, lavish gifts of love, and how much is enough.

It will be a series of **good, hard, important** conversations, and I hope you will consider joining them.

Because, to paraphrase verse 13 – You can either serve this present age and love its treasures, or you can love and serve God in this present age. But you cannot do both. One leads to death. The other leads to life.⁷

~ AMEN ~

⁷ Helen Montgomery Debevoise, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.