

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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I'm the kind of person who loves a good plot twist in a book or a tv show or video game or whatever. You think the writer is setting the story to go one way and then BAM we ended up going somewhere else entirely. When it's done well, well then you've got my full attention! Which is ironic because I also have this terrible habit when I'm at home of being like "yep, I know where my husband is going with this conversation about like all the yard work we need to do, I only need to half listen here." Until suddenly a sentence contains the phrase "with the fire" and it sounds like maybe a question was happening about this fire business and now he has my full attention again and I'm rapidly trying to piece together what led up to this, and...suddenly I'm not really feeling like a fan of plot twists anymore.

And today's gospel reading gives me the same sort of feeling in my gut as those conversations I checked out in. Because you know I hear the name "Parable of the Dishonest Manager," and I go "Ah yes, I know where Jesus is going with this story! That manager is bad! Let me learn why I should not be like him!" Initially that seems like exactly what we're about to receive. This rich landowner alleges that his manager is squandering the former's property, so the landowner gives him notice and says he needs to see the books. And the *very* next thing the manager does is meet with all the people indebted to his master, ask them how much they owe, and then *replaces that number with a lower amount!* So, not

only did he *not* keep track of how much was owed in the first place, since he had to ask all of them what their debt was, but now he's actively embezzling his employer. So yeah, I think I get why he's being fired.

And then the master approaches the manager. Ok Jesus so tell me about the negative consequence he faces, some kind of chastisement or punishment or something I'm sure. But...that doesn't come! Instead, the landowner *praises* the manager and calls him shrewd for *cooking the books* in a manner that goes *against* the master's own best interests? That...doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Maybe my mind started to wander at some point during the story and I missed something important? How is that wise behavior?

And maybe now is a good time to throw in that most biblical commentaries on this text say something along the lines of "this passage is confusing!" or "While we can't be sure, here's our top 3 best guesses as to what is happening!" or "this is a passage that's much easier to offer comments on than write a coherent sermon about, sorry preachers!" So...thanks Pastor Jason for giving me this week. I guess.

And maybe now is also a good time to orient this story in the rest of the gospel. Because this story about debt that is being erased, follows immediately on the heels of *another* story of debt forgiveness. The story of the Prodigal son. A son who squandered his father's property, and as a result he had to find work doing hard manual labor, much as this dishonest manager fears will happen to him. So he resolves to return to his father's house and beg for forgiveness and to be employed doing labor at his father's house instead. And the father sees him coming, runs to him, hugs him, restores him to his position, dresses him in the best robes, throws a party, and slaughters the fattened calf to celebrate.

And I know when I hear *that* story, I place myself firmly in the shoes of that prodigal son. I get this joyful feeling of awe that God's love for me would continue despite whatever nonsense I get up to. No matter what, God is still running across the yard to hold me, and I'm forgiven, before I even choke an apology out. Yes! Jesus this is awesome! More please!

...and then he gives us more. And while I wouldn't say it's a mirror image of that prodigal story, it is a variation on the same theme, though shot from a different angle. And for me at least, I could see the perspectives of that father and son and this interaction is—is good and gracious! But with this manager...I struggle to find the same sense of wonder. I'm sure I'd feel very different about it if that landowner was forgiving the debt, it is 'his' after all, but the manager doing it? That seems pretty immoral, seems like he's been dishonest with the little he's been given and therefore can't be trusted with that true wealth Jesus has been talking about! Seems like he hasn't' been faithful with what belongs to another! Ok I'm back on track so he *is* in trouble!

And then Jesus slams us with the plot twist. No slave can serve two masters. You can't serve God and wealth. This is the moment for me, where much like those conversations I zoned out in, that I'm backtracking and trying to piece together what was just said and the context that I'd missed. Because I'd assumed that the money and riches, that dishonest wealth, that Mammon that in the Middle Ages was rendered as a literal demon, that was the "wealth" we needed to be faithful with. That if I had a little bit of money and did good stewardship with it, then I'd get a true riches amount, and that I wouldn't get that reward if I did bad stewardship, especially if it was someone else's money.

But Jesus is saying there that the money is not the riches part. People are. Our relationships with one another are. One theory for why the manager is hacking such *large* amounts off the debt owed, is that he was removing all the interest charges. Remember, charging interest amongst one another goes against Torah law, but was standard practice in the Roman Empire. So those wealthy sons of Israel who were in the position to give out loans suddenly had a choice before them. Do they want to charge interest? Do they serve God, or wealth? There is no option to do both. You have to pick. From records that have survived from that region, it seems like 20% was a pretty normal interest rate for loans paid for using food products, although much higher rates also occurred. The manager is removing 20% and 50% of the total on those loans.

Forget the landowner's position for a moment. How life-giving would an action like this be if it were *your* debt? If you woke up tomorrow and found that the interest rates on your credit cards or car, or house, or *all the interest* on your student loan debt, or your medical debt or that pay day loan you needed to take out in an emergency or whatever other kind of financial debt you carry, was gone? Not gone to start up again next month, but just gone. What would you do? Probably pull out that calf to celebrate, huh?

Maybe that's why the landowner calls the manager shrewd because he sees exactly what the guy did. He removed charges that weren't supposed to be there in the first place, and the landowner can't really say anything about it without publicly admitting what he did. Like the scoffing Pharisees, he wants to be justified before others, wants to keep up appearances. Even though it's not a secret to God what he's been doing. God sees this loyalty to wealth and calls it abomination.

That manager was given temporary authority over another's dishonest wealth, and in so doing was also given a choice. Will he serve God or Wealth? He could have spent this time pocketing anything of worth that was lying around or like the landowner, made up another fee that they "owe," insisted they need to pay it to him right now, and then skipped town. That is what loyalty to Mammon would have him do.

Instead, he was faithful, his last actions before he lost his position of power was to remove the predatory charges that his neighbors were no doubt struggling under. Sure, you can say that being "faithful with what belongs to another" means that the landowner needs to be paid what is owed. But here instead Jesus is suggesting that "what belongs to another" are those 20 containers of wheat and 50 jugs of olive oil staying with those workers of the land. Those items had never truly belonged to the landowner in the first place.

We want those prodigal son moments where God forgives us our extravagant debts, but so often we shy away from opportunities where we can be like this manager of dishonest wealth and forgive the debts of others--even as we pray "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." I struggle to even comprehend what a world like that would look like, as we are currently so far from that, but what a vision to strive towards!

But until that day comes, may God grant us shrewdness and cunning so that we can find ways to bring deliverance to our neighbors this week and always. Amen.