

Luke 16: 1-13 Play the Hand One Is Dealt

Psalm 113 is a beautiful song of praise, reminding us of the goodness of God. And it is good for us to be grounded in these ancient words testifying to the depth of God's faithfulness, as we listen to the challenging words from the Gospel of Luke this morning.

When I found out the pericope, that is, the bible passage given to us for our hearing on this day, my first reaction was, oh, no. This is the one that almost every commentary admits that despite centuries of interpretation, questions about the parable exceed answers. Great; this on the Sunday when the best and most honest critic of my sermon, my daughter, is going to be sitting in the pew.

The good news is, whether a parable seems so simple that it feels self-explanatory, or so shocking that baffles our mind (like the ones we've heard more recently,) or so confusing that baffles our mind (like the one you are about to hear,) the Scripture is the Living Word through which the Spirit speaks to us and meets us where we are, often asking us the questions we ought to be asking. Let us prepare our hearts to receive the Word for us this morning. (Read Luke 16: 1-13)

You have often heard me say "At First Glance, the story seems to be telling..." It's because with parables, there is always a twist.

Parables reveal an otherwise hidden truth through a story setting that is familiar to the listeners.

Jesus is telling this parable to his disciples, as they continue their journey toward Jerusalem. Jesus knows his earthly mission will end there, on the cross. So, on his way, he wants to pass on all important lessons to his disciples, so they can carry on his work, spreading the gospel that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We've heard Jesus's parables about table fellowship and what it means to keep sabbath, his message of radical hospitality and inclusion, of his actions that on the surface appear to defy the law but in truth are fulfilling God's commandment at the deepest level.

In today's parable, Jesus is teaching one of these major themes the disciples, and by extension we, need to grapple with, and that is the matter of possessions; what his followers are to do with the earthly, material wealth. But what is disorienting is that Jesus seems to be saying we are to do what this dishonest manager did, and to make friends by means of "dishonest wealth." And yet, Jesus concludes that we cannot serve Two Masters, we cannot serve God and wealth. Again, how does this teaching mesh with everything we've been taught?

This dishonest manager who schemes to “buy security” by dishonest means is an example of the “children of this age,” dealing shrewdly with his own generation. When the security of his job is threatened, he plays well the hand he’s been dealt. What he had at his disposal was the dishonest wealth, the wealth that belonged to another, his master, and what he managed to secure for himself through his dishonest scheming was a situation when he’s jobless, those indebted to him would let him into their “home.”

Interestingly, the writer of this Gospel, who was presenting Jesus’s ministry in “an orderly manner,” brings this parable right after the parable of the Prodigal Son. You can almost name this parable, the parable of the prodical manager.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the son “squanders” the inheritance he grabbed from his father. But he repents and comes home, not expecting to be received as a son but hoping that his father would take him back as a servant. But the Father not only welcomes the son back but celebrates that the son who had been lost has returned. In this story, we have a glimpse of the kindom of God, where forgiveness and mercy rule. The children of light inhabit this kindom.

In contrast to the story of the Prodigal Son, today’s parable gives us a glimpse of the earthly world Jesus and Luke lived in,

among the children of this age. There's a parallel; just like the prodigal son, the prodigal manager squanders his master's money. But unlike the forgiving Father, the master here threatens the "prodigal" manager that he'd no longer be the steward of his property. The prodigal son and the dishonest manager faced the same dilemma of uncertain future.

But while the prodigal son repented and put himself at the mercy of his father, this option does not occur to the prodigal manager, who is a child of this age; he is to fend for himself and the options he could see, to support himself by physical labor or by begging, were not acceptable. So he comes up with a plan to secure himself a shelter, a fundamental human need; he takes what belonged to his master and further squanders it to make the master's debtors "owe him a favor." And the prodigal manager is commended by the master of this age for his shrewdness, for such is the way of this world.

Then, Jesus tells his disciples to make friends for themselves by means of "dishonest wealth" so that when it is gone, they may be welcome into the eternal homes. Jesus's followers are the children of Light, so their security lies in the eternal, heavenly homes. But how does the "dishonest wealth" get you there?

What does Jesus mean by “dishonest wealth?” Under the Roman Empire, which was the world of Jesus and Luke, the slaves who had nothing were 40% of the population, and the dirt poor were another 40% of the population, leaving about 10% who were free citizen who didn’t suffer very much but were by no means wealthy. The power-that-be of the empire put heavy tax on those who did not have much. In such world of systemic injustice and its resulting structural poverty, no wealth could have been accumulated without benefitting from injustice. And the Greek word in the original NT text that is translated here as “dishonest,” means “unjust” or “unrighteous.” So, in the world that thrived on systemic injustice that maintained structural poverty, Jesus was right in naming “dishonest wealth,” for there was no other kind of wealth possible. We are not talking about the 1 coin that poor woman lost and went looking until she found.

“Dishonest” is used not just as an adjective for the character of the manager, but for the nature of the world they lived in. Jesus is not telling the disciples to become dishonest like that manager and get into shady business dealings, using “dark money,” etc.; rather, he is naming that any earthly possessions they handle are tainted, intrinsically unjust.

Jesus is being real here about the unjust nature of the world he and the disciples lived in. Do you think it might apply to our world today? That's where the parable meets you and me. Jesus does not avert his eyes from the reality that the world God created good we have made "dishonest" and "unrighteous" by turning it into one in which only a small segment thrives at the cost of many, a world of systemic injustice

We talked about the meaning of the word "righteous" in the biblical sense. It means to be in the right relationship with God. The world in which Jesus lived in, the Roman Empire, was systemically unrighteous, corrupt, and yet it was the world in which, and for which, the disciples were to continue Jesus's work after his death in Jerusalem. Is it possible that it applies also to us today?

The gospel of Jesus Christ is to defy the way of this age and to usher in the way of God's reign, the rule of forgiveness and mercy. Yet, the hand we are dealt is the dishonest wealth of the dishonest age. What are we to do?

Luke concludes this parable of the prodigal manager with the saying of Jesus: "One cannot serve two masters, the unjust wealth and God, for one 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." We tend to hear this expression in a binary mindset: you

have to hate wealth if you were to love God. But you remember the passage when Jesus said no one can be his disciples if they do not hate their father and mother? Remember we talked about how the Greek word translated as “hate” in English means to “love less, to esteem less,” without carrying any of the hostility implied in the English word “hate?” That word for Hate here is the same Greek word. It means to detach oneself from; to love something less; it is a matter of priority.

So, the point of Jesus’s saying here is we cannot serve two masters; one must take priority over the other. If we cannot serve both the riches and God, just as the dishonest manager took hold of his situation and played the hand he was dealt, we, too, are to take hold of the earthly possession in our disposition. But, unlike the dishonest manager, the children of Light are to use it to secure ourself our eternal, heavenly place. We are to be smart, just as the manager was with what we have, but to use it to advance God’s realm.

The issue of wealth and poverty is where Jesus’s message confronts the wisdom and the practice of the world, the one the disciples lived in AND the one in which we live; that’s the hand we are dealt, and we must play well, as we carry-on Jesus’s ministry beyond his departure from the earth.

We know from the very same Gospel that there were women of means who supported esus and the disciples with their worldly

possessions. We are not to be devoted to the material resources, but to engage with it so as to fashion our world according to God's will.

In our days, it's not just money; we speak of "political assets." Sure, it's hard to imagine politics without corruption these days. But, that's the hand we are dealt. Engage. I'm not commending one political party over the other, but in whatever ways we can, we are to engage with our "worldly assets" to bring about the change that reflects the kingdom of God here on earth.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) comes together at the General Assembly and decide if the church should divest from companies we believes are being destructive to the world. The Presbyterian Church has loan programs that the money one congregation is saving can be help other congregation in the form of loan. Your session, think hard where to keep the reserve money, while we have them, to do justice to our church and the larger world.

We are the children of Light, and as Psalm 113 reminds us, our God, is seated on high, looks far down on the heavens and the earth. God raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap. We follow the example of the Prodigal Son and rely on the mercy of God, but we follow Christ in this age. May the Spirit grant us wisdom to play well the hand we are dealt. Amen.