

September 18, 2016

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Sermon: The Taming of the Shrewd

Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

¹⁸My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. ¹⁹Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?” (“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”) ²⁰“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” ²¹For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. ²²Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

New Testament Lesson: Luke 16:1-13

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. ²So 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.’ ³Then 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. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then 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.’ ⁸And 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. ⁹And 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. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No 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.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon:

When I was learning the craft of preaching in seminary, we talked about the scenario of the Bird in the Sanctuary.

As a preacher you spend a lot of time thinking about the text and working on a message and praying that you will have something meaningful to say. And then the moment comes and you step into the pulpit and do your best to communicate your message to the congregation. To a certain extent, you will ignore distractions in an effort to honor your work. You will ignore the crying child. You will ignore the sleeping senior. But – my professor warned – you should *never* ignore the bird. Sooner or later, an ill-fated bird will find its way into your sanctuary, flapping in through an open door or window, only to nestle somewhere in the rafters. The bird will be restless and trapped and fly occasionally from ledge to ledge.

Rest assured, the professor said, 75-100 percent of your congregation will be unable to think about anything other than that bird. They will be concerned for it. *Will it ever escape? What will it do next? Will it poop on me?* Furthermore, they will be concerned for the preacher. Because, they will be thinking, *Everyone is looking at the bird. Everyone is distracted. What is the preacher going to do about it?*

When a bird flies into your sanctuary, you have no choice but to acknowledge it. Stop your sermon. Acknowledge the bird. *Welcome* it even. Make room for it. And then continue on your way. There is a temptation to plow ahead with your prepared remarks, to keep your

eyes on the prize. But when that happens you've become the worst possible thing: the preacher who is ignoring what is happening. When that happens, your sermon is dead in the water. To welcome the bird into your sermon not only allows the Gospel to return into the congregation's focus but it also makes the Gospel alive with *what is happening now*.

I bring all this up, of course, because I believe that there is a bird in the sanctuary today. Not a real bird, thankfully, but a bird nonetheless, a nagging, distressing distraction from the sermon. The bird in our sanctuary today is this: our so-called Parable of the Shrewd Manager – it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. It is a notoriously difficult text.

The theologian Rudolf Bultmann called it “the Problem Child of Jesus’ parables.” Phyllis Tickle calls it “the most difficult parable of all.” It’s a hot mess. I got an email earlier this week from a preacher friend. The subject of the email read: “Luke 16:1-13.” The content of the email simply said, “What the heck.”

I have to confess, as the professional meaning-maker up here, that there is a temptation to choose an inadequate interpretation, gloss over the contradictions, tag it with an emotional story and offer it up as a source of inspiration and hope. We could call it the Taming of the Shrewd. But to do that, I believe, is to run the risk of ignoring the bird in the sanctuary. So instead I will stop cleaning it up and simply say that this story is very interesting and, from my point of view, defies any satisfying interpretation.

Rather than whitewash that confusion, that complexity, what would happen if we acknowledge it, welcome it even? What would happen if we say, “Holy Spirit, come into this sanctuary, bird or no bird, confusions and contradictions, broken hearts and addled minds. Holy Spirit, come in. Come in and reveal your Good News, your Good News in the midst of what is happening now. Amen.”

A parable is a simple story that reveals some sort of deeper truth. On its surface, every parable has what is called the “plain meaning,” or the

story itself. But parables also have a secondary, metaphorical, or intuitive meaning. Parables are sneaky. Jesus frequently told simple stories which reveal unexpected, metaphorical glimpses into the Kingdom of God.

When I realized that last week Andrew was preaching on the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, I assumed that I would be preaching on the parable of the Prodigal Son. It's the very next passage in Luke 15. This seemed like great news for me, because everyone loves the Prodigal Son. It's the most famous of Jesus' parables. If you are rusty on the details, it goes like this:

There is a father with two sons. And while the older son is responsible and hardworking, the younger son is impulsive and ungrateful. He demands his inheritance as a young man and then moves out in a self-righteous huff. He spends the money in wild and frivolous ways and finds himself bankrupt and friendless. He lives with pigs. And then he thinks – maybe I could just move back into my father's home as a servant. I would be better off than I am now.

And the Prodigal Son is making his way down the road, rehearsing his apology, when the famous twist occurs. The Father, who has been waiting, who has already forgiven him, bursts out the front door and meets him halfway down the road and embraces him and weeps and throws a huge party because his son, who had been lost, is found.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is so beautiful and the Parable of the Prodigal Son is so boring. Beautiful because we need that kind of grace in our life, because each of us has been the prodigal at one time or another, beautiful because there is nothing more powerful than unexpected grace. Boring because we've told this story a thousand times. Boring because it follows a certain churchy logic. Boring because I could write a sermon about the prodigal son in my sleep, knowing that no matter what I said, in the end, the father will burst out the door, arms open in forgiveness, alleluia, and Amen.

Here's the thing – God's grace, unvarnished and unexpected, is the most powerful thing I can imagine. It brings tears of joy to my eyes. But God's grace reduced to moralisms and predictable stories and rhetorical

questions *is* boring. It makes Sunday School the longest hour of the week. It makes Mother Theresa sneak a peak at her watch.

The hardest thing about preaching the Prodigal Son is finding fresh language to talk about it – a new way into the heart of the matter, God’s amazing grace.

So I thought that was my challenge this week. But then, when I actually looked up the preaching text, I discovered that we skipped right over the Prodigal Son and landed squarely on the Shrewd Manager. The Problem Child of all parables. Somewhere overhead I heard a bird swoop into the sanctuary, a pitch-black silhouette against the Tiffany windows.

The hardest thing about preaching the Shrewd Manager is just preaching the Shrewd Manager.

Let’s start with the story itself.

Jesus says that there was a rich man who had a manager. In fact, in Jesus’ day, almost all rich men had managers. The culture of ancient Palestine was more or less a feudal one. There was really no such thing as middle-class people. You were either very wealthy or you lived a peasant’s life, scrapping for your existence within the economy of an overlord. The rich lived lives of leisure, delegating even their own business transactions to other people. And the role of manager was actually a highly privileged one. Like a tax collector, it was understood by everyone that managers made their living by taking a cut out of every transaction they conducted.

But a really important aspect of that arrangement, however, is that your income as a manager always came off the backs of the poor, not from the money that your boss was entitled. In other words, overcharging the customer to make a living is fine. Under-reimbursing the boss is not.

Another interesting wrinkle here is that Jewish law, laid out in the Book of Deuteronomy, made it illegal to charge interest in business

transactions. So in order to make a profit, managers would inflate the cost of their product, rolling the interest into the principal.

This dynamic might sound familiar if you work in, say, the Epi-Pen industry.

Anyway, when the rich man caught wind of a rumor that his manager was squandering his property, we can assume that he did not fire him with righteous indignation on behalf of his aggrieved customers. He fired him because he was wasting his money. And note that the text does not actually say that the manager *was* dishonest. The rich man heard a rumor, made an accusation, and terminated his manager. End of story.

The shrewd manager would have been one of the few people in the feudal economy who could earn a living without engaging in back-breaking physical labor. Faced with a termination, he knew he was in a terrible situation, because while the poor peasants of the community had little in the way of wealth, they could at least rely on each other for survival. They weren't highly likely to help out this man who had been swindling them for years.

It's worth noting that up until this moment, the stories of the Prodigal Son and the Shrewd Manager follow somewhat similar plots. An unethical man receives his comeuppance for years of bad behavior. He finds himself in a tight spot and considers how to save his own tail.

However, where the Prodigal prepares a humble speech of apology, the Shrewd Manager prepares one final act of deception.

He goes to each of the rich man's clients and asks them to quickly reduce what debts they owe. He works his way through the Rolodex, cooking the books and hoping to ingratiate himself with enough people to keep him off the streets.

In this moment, we can confirm what has so far only been alleged. The manager is as crooked as a three-dollar bill. He's the Prodigal Son with more spine and less scruples. He's a bad man and a good hustler.

But don't you know those chickens will come home to roost? They always do, in these religious stories, right? And sure enough, the manager is busted. The rich man catches him red-handed. And shaking with rage, he flips the tables over, giving the manager a swift kick to the rear on his way out the door.

Or no, wait, that's actually *not* what happens. The rich man *commends* his manager for his shady behavior. And that's where the story ends.

"The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with this generation than the children of light," Jesus says, before adding, "Make friends for yourself with dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes."

It's not exactly a sermon wrapped up with a tidy bow. Honestly, I'm not even going to touch the other things Jesus says at the end of the story. They don't help clear it up. And I don't have time.

What's really interesting to me about all of this is that the Shrewd Manager has a very similar plot twist to the Prodigal, with none of the emotional satisfaction. It's very hard to understand how the conclusion makes sense.

The commentaries I read this week really run the gamut. Some go to great lengths to paint the rich man as an extremely generous person – willing to love the manager even when confronted with his blatant dishonesty. This follows the churchy logic of the Prodigal but I just don't buy it here. If anything, the rich man seems impulsive and shrewd himself. Jesus doesn't suggest that the manager gets his job back, after all.

Another reading interprets Jesus' telling of the story as extremely sarcastic. Perhaps if we heard Jesus' voice, instead of simply reading the

words, we would understand the contempt the rich man oozed when he “commended” his former employee. But this explanation doesn’t square with the teachings Jesus offers after the story.

In the end, the only explanation that I find compelling is one that assumes some context that might have been self-evident to Luke’s original audience. If the manager made his living by adding his own cut into his client’s bills, then he may have simply cut his own profit from the debt owed.

This would minimize the rich man’s losses, please the debtors, and put the manager back in the good graces of the community.

In this light, Jesus’ teaching makes more sense: “Make friends for yourself with dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone they may welcome you into eternal homes.”

I can imagine the rich man offering his manager some begrudging respect, even as he cleans out his desk. I can also imagine the peasants regarding him with a wary curiosity, waiting to see how long this new-found generosity will last.

It’s an unsatisfying conclusion, full of ambiguity and mixed motives. Is it a new beginning for the manager or just the newest con? Only time will tell. It’s not a satisfying story, but it feels a lot more like real life to me than the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son ends with a big party, rom-com style. The Shrewd Manager ends with a flourish of Microsoft Excel.

Jesus says, “Whoever is faithful in a little is also faithful in much.”

I’ve always taken that to mean that if you prove yourself to be faithful in small things, then you will one day be allowed to be faithful in big things, like some sort of religious promotion.

But what if Jesus also means that being faithful in a little is so much of what our human life looks like?

We live in a world of fickle friends, tenuous employment, dishonest wealth, icky decisions. We do the hard work of choosing what feels like the best of several unpleasant options. We try hard to give our spouses the benefit of the doubt. We try not to bite off the heads of our children. We struggle to pay polite attention to that lady in the lunchroom who talks too much and only about herself.

Most days that's the beginning and end of it.

In other words, we try to be faithful in a little. It's not much, really, but we are trying our best to live in the shades of gray, live in the muddled moment, live inside of what's happening right now.

To me, the Prodigal Son and Shrewd Manager belong together. Because as much as we love the moment when the Father bursts out the door, arms open to forgive us, to weep over us and throw a party, we know that most days that is not the world we live in.

To say we live in a Prodigal Son world is to have our blinders on to the *actual* world, what is actually happening. So much of what is actually happening is right there on the shady ledgers of the shrewd manager, as much as we would like it to be otherwise.

As much as we would like to stay focused on our prepared remarks, a bird flaps and flutters in the rafters. And we have to acknowledge it, as unwelcome as that prospect is. We have to pay attention to what is happening now, in the place where nothing ever happens as we planned it or wanted it to be.

Because you know what? Here's the twist. That's where it always begins. In the desert of our boring, disappointing, everyday life. A tiny spiritual awakening. A forgiven debt. A notion – maybe I'll return home after all.

It starts there, step after boring step. Somewhere along the way we discover it within ourselves – the capacity for surprise. New life flutters in, the door swings open, the Father runs out to embrace us, tears running down his cheeks. And for once, we are undone by the power of it, the unexpected grace.