

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

In each of the three years of our cycle of gospel readings, we concentrate on one of the synoptic, or similar, gospels, Mark, Matthew, or Luke. This year it has been Luke. After Advent this year we will begin our readings from Mark. As we hear and consider these passages from Luke, we are treated to some parables which are a little more complicated and thought-provoking than ones we otherwise find in Mark and Matthew. In particular, we hear Jesus describing characters who share their thoughts. We get to eavesdrop on their thoughts. If you're wondering, just 'what were they thinking ?!', in several of these parables Jesus gives us some secretive insight. Think of two other famous parables from Luke, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, where in each case we are told more than just what the characters do; we have a deeper insight into why they do them and what they were thinking. They aren't just stories with a moral ending, they are a study of the way the human mind works in real-life, daily situations and crises. Today's story, which is commonly called the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, is just that kind of teaching tool.

This parable Jesus told his disciples is one we used to call 'a difficult text' in seminary. There are some such texts in the Bible, ones which aren't so easily understood or explained. Ones which are hard to preach about, for example. Ones about which you can read professional commentaries from the last thousand years or more which will lead you down multiple rabbit holes in search of just what Jesus was trying to communicate through the stories he told. So, one of the ways to deal with a difficult text is to identify the relevant questions. What is the important context of the story?, for example. Or who among us do the characters represent? Where is God, or the Spirit of God, lurking in the backstory? Is there a hero, does someone in the story do something heroic? Does someone in the story do something faithful? Does the parable help us choose a better way to live and answer the question 'what is the faithful thing to do?'. Asking such questions will sometimes seem to help. And, other times, they just muddy the waters. Let's look at this parable a little closer:

The context of the story is an economic system which shouldn't be especially unfamiliar to people of this world: A rich man is in control, but since he has important things to do, people to see, and a privileged lifestyle to maintain, he hires a manager to keep his records, handle his accounts, and manage the business activities which made him rich in the first place. That seems pretty normal, doesn't it? But he has heard that his manager has been dishonest, apparently trying to improve his own privileges by embezzling and cheating on the accounts. So, the rich man decides to fire the manager. Seems fair, right? But first, the manager is told to turn over the books so they can be audited, and that sends him into a panic. Losing this job will mean that he will have to make his economic way in this world differently, and he doesn't think he is suited to any other profitable employment. Unless, of course, he is even more dishonest, and can salvage some of the money from those who owe the rich man debts, seeming to be generous with them and gaining their trust and friendship. Under false and dishonest pretext, of course. Interestingly, the rich man applauds this dishonest plan, calling it admirably 'shrewd', or worldly-wise. The manager has shown that he can use, or misuse, the system well, perhaps having learned the ways of the rich man, or the ways of the world. He gets fired anyway, BTW.

And then, in this passage from Luke, Jesus tells his disciples why he has told this story, and the text, frankly, becomes even more difficult. Does Jesus really mean that they should use dishonest wealth to make friends? Am I hearing this right, that Jesus teaches that the children of light ought to prove their

ability to be faithful with dishonest wealth? And that that is the way they can be trusted with true riches like the ones that are stored up in heaven? What ever happened to first asking 'what is the faithful thing to do?' Is it to be replaced with the question 'what is the shrewd thing to do?' Is Jesus suggesting that honesty is not always the best policy? Is there a moral point to this story, or is it just good practical advice? It is a difficult, and in some ways surprising text. And sometimes in seminary, we were encouraged to go to the very end of the passage, the very last thing Jesus had to say in a particular teaching moment, to discern the whole point of the text, so let's do that now.

At the very end of these 13 verses about the dishonest manager and what the disciples might learn from his story, Jesus says "You cannot serve [both] God and wealth. In the King James's version, you may have heard, that important line is translated "You cannot serve both God and mammon". Those teams of translators King James commissioned 400 years ago chose that word 'Mammon', which means worldly wealth and possessions, as opposed to spiritual riches and opportunities. And Mammon is treated in some reformation literature (in Milton, for example) as a character, a personality, who tries to seduce the faithful person to a life of deceit, to leave the divine ways of living. So, if we consult the very last thing Jesus has to say about this teaching, we find that he is insisting that the disciples NOT be seduced by Mammon, or even try to serve *both* God and Mammon, for they are irreconcilably different, incompatible, and there is no love lost between them. But, you might ask, why doesn't Jesus just say that? Why does he need to tell this whole complicated story just to make that point? When he says "If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" is he suggesting that faithfulness is more important than honesty? "When he says if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?" is he giving a pass to dishonestly gained possessions? Just what is the gospel message here?

I think that the underlying teaching in this very important parable is about being in the world but not of the world. I think that Jesus is telling the disciples, the children of the light, that they have much to learn from this world if indeed they want to change the world. Jesus is applauding neither the rich man in this story nor the dishonest manager, but is admitting that their authority and behavior cannot really just be dismissed. Yes, as Luke writes near the beginning of his gospel document, in Mary's Magnificat after being told she will bear the very Son of God. "the lowly will be filled with good things, and the rich God will send away empty", and that is the ironic, divine, intention, but for now, being shrewd, or wise, in the world is something the children of light will find necessary and helpful. Remember that the Gospel of Luke, like much of the New Testament, was written to encourage and instruct the new converts to Jesus' way of peace, forgiveness, and devotion, the second generation Christians. And they were a minority, much as we Christians are a minority today. They were, as we often are, people whose beliefs and values are dismissed and frequently ridiculed in the public square. It would not serve them, or us, to think we are in some ivory tower above the chaos, looking down and judging the rest of our generation with self-righteousness. It would not be the faithful thing to do. We should be in the world, but not of the world

I think Luke may have chosen this teaching of Jesus as part of his Gospel message to remind us and those early Christians that we ourselves ought to be connected both to God *and* to the world if we are to make a faithful difference. That it is wise to stay in the game if we want to influence the outcome, even if we frequently disagree with the established rules. That, strategically, the children of light (if that's what we hope to become) can indeed learn a few things from this generation of the children of the world. Do not look down our noses at those with whom we share this space; they, too, are God's creatures and have been created with useful gifts even if they have not quite learned to use them faithfully. But never, ever, forget that there is one true master, one who promotes love. One who is, in fact, love itself. Amen.