

Guarding the Heart

Luke 16:1-13

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ September 22, 2019

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager. The Parable of the Shrewd Manager. The Parable of the Unjust Steward. The parable has many names, including: “Most Dreaded.” At least one scholar says, “...this may be the [most dreaded](#) parable and context for a parable in the gospels.”¹ It’s a bear of a text. It’s extremely demanding. It’s difficult to understand. Its meaning is not easily apparent—and I’m not sure anyone has fully fathomed what Jesus is getting at here (including me, of course) or why Luke includes it in his gospel, and why it is situated right after the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But it’s the gospel lectionary for this week, so let’s see what the Spirit has to say to us.

First, we need to note that the parable is directed at the disciples, not the crowds. It’s for them, the disciples. And what does he say to them?

There was a rich man who had a manager, an *oikonomon*, in Greek. *Oikos*=house + *nomos*=law, meaning “house or household manager.” *Oikos* is the root of the English word “economy,” so we could call him an “economist.” Complaints were brought to the rich man that his economist was squandering the property. So the economist is summoned by the rich man who yells at him—the Greek word used here is the same word Luke uses to describe the cock that crows at Peter’s denial, the rich man crying out of the flames begging Abraham to have Lazarus give him aid, and Jesus crying from the cross. It’s a cry, a shout. This is an emotional confrontation. The economist is asked about these rumors. The rich man believes the charges against the economist and is on the verge of saying to him, “You’re fired.” So the economist asks himself, “What am I going to do? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg.” So he comes up with a plan, a scheme to make sure that when he’s fired, his boss’s clients will think good of him. He secretly talks with the debtors and reduces the amount owed the rich man. So he continues to be dishonest. But he’s settling debts in a way that gives advantage to the debtors, not his manager, thus placing himself in their good graces. He’s hoping they will remember what he did for them after he loses his job. But the rich man finds out—and this is where things get really weird—the rich man then *commends* the dishonest economist “because he acted shrewdly” (Lk. 16:8).

This is where the parable seems to end. Because Jesus proceeds to comment on the parable and says, “...the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (Lk. 16:8). And who are the children of light? The disciples, the true followers of Jesus. So, is Jesus calling them to be dishonest? Shrewd? What does Jesus want from his disciples? “And I tell you,” he says, “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes” (Lk. 16:9). The jury is out on what Jesus means by “eternal homes” or “dwellings” or, literally, “eternal tents.” So what’s going on here?

What if we relax our focus a little, release our grip on this text, take a step back and not try so hard to figure out what it “means.” Sometimes even when we’re trying not to be literalist

in our reading of scripture, we end up being literalists nevertheless because we still want to know what it “means.” Meaning often suggests control. Once we know what a text means, we think we have it all figured out, then it’s “ours,” and we can move on. This might sound odd, but sometimes the interpretation of scripture can be a form of violence, an act of violence against a text. And perhaps we are more violent toward texts whose meaning confounds us, like this one.

Remember, Jesus is a teacher who is trying to school his disciples, his students. He’s trying to get them to see what others can’t see or won’t see. He wants them to go deep and he uses parables to help them see or, better, he’s trying to teach them—teach us—*how* to see with the heart. He’s showing us what to see and what to emphasize in seeing. In the reading of a text, sometimes we have to emphasize something or ignore something altogether in order to see beyond it, to what’s behind the text. When you wrestle with a text like a parable you almost have to suspend belief; and you have to ask a lot of questions, turn it over in your heart and mind and gut, and let the text question you.

This is what is called *midrash* in the Jewish tradition—asking lots of questions to keep the spiritual meaning open, not closed. A midrash reading of a text is open and allows many possibilities. To this day, Hebrew rabbis and scholars sometimes use the approach of midrash to reflect on a story and communicate all of its underlying message.

[Richard Rohr](#), reflecting of the need to reintroduce midrash into the Christian tradition, reminds us that “Scripture can be understood on at least four levels: literal meaning, deep meaning, comparative meaning, and hidden meaning. The literal level of meaning doesn’t get to the root and, in fact, is the least helpful to the soul and the most dangerous for history. Deep meaning offers symbolic or allegorical applications. Comparative study combines different texts to explore an entirely new meaning. Finally, in traditional Jewish exegesis, hidden meaning gets at the Mystery itself. Midrash allows and encourages each listener to grow with a text and not to settle for mere literalism, which, of itself, bears little spiritual fruit. It is just a starting point.”²

A midrash of the parable might help us hear what Jesus is saying, help us to see what Jesus wants us to see. It will help us get beyond thinking of this text as somehow a justification for dishonest business practices. Jesus isn’t a literalist. He wants his students to be shrewd, to be wise, to be faithful to what is being given to them—by him. He says, “If you can’t be faithful with what doesn’t belong to you, how can you be faithful with what does belong to you? If you can’t be faithful even with dirty money, how can you be faithful with true riches, true wealth (Luke 16:10-11)? And even here, we mustn’t be literalist—yes, Jesus is talking about money and wealth and economies that are just and unjust. But even money and wealth and mammon is a way for Jesus to talk about something of even greater value, of greater wealth, of greater treasure: the treasure of your heart. For the place where the heart finds its treasure, there it finds its value. Jesus wants his disciples to tend to the economy of the heart. And so we need to ask ourselves as disciples: who or what is driving the economy of my heart? As individuals, and as a church, we need to ask: who or what is driving the economy of our hearts? “No 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” (Lk. 16:13).

So, yes, Jesus is talking about our savings and investments and IRAs, actual wealth. But he's also talking about how our wealth and savings and income and investments are directly related to the health of the heart. I like to think of Jesus as a cardiologist, who knew that healthy hearts means healthy people. The heart in the first century was understood as the total self: thought, feeling, and action. That is the heart. Healthy heart, healthy person. And a good way, not the only way, but a good way to measure the health of our hearts is our relationship toward money and wealth and our ability to be truly generous with what has been entrusted to us, with what is ours and not ours.

You can tell that Jesus struck a nerve with the telling of this parable. Even though it was directed at his disciples, the Pharisees, never far away and always suspicious of Jesus, overhear what he says. The next verse tells us: "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sights of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God'" (Lk. 16:15).

So, you see, yes, Jesus is talking about wealth and money and economics, but he's really interested in the economy of the heart. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Lk. 12:34). We could flip this around and say that where your heart is, there will your treasure be also. If the heart is the right place—*really, truly* in the right place—you know that's your treasure. And if your heart is in the wrong place, with the wrong priorities, you might think you have treasure, but you really don't. How one relates to money is a kind of cardiogram, providing a picture of the condition of one's heart. You might be rich in the eyes of the world, but from God's perspective you're impoverished. Doesn't Proverbs say, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Prov. 4:23)? When the heart is open and broad and generous, the heart has found its treasure, its true treasure. When your heart is in the right place, that is the treasure. And Jesus wants his disciples, wants us, to have our hearts in the right place.

When our hearts are in the right place, God entrusts us with riches that don't belong to us—such as grace and love and compassion and justice and the gospel itself. These are "riches" that don't belong to us, but which God nevertheless wants to give us. We could ask ourselves, then, Are we trustworthy? Are we dependable? Are we good stewards, managers, economists? But, as this parable seems to suggest, what does "good" and what does "trustworthy" mean from a kingdom perspective, where all the rules have been changed? In the Kingdom, up is down; down is up. Those on the inside are on the outside; those on the outside are on the inside. God's Kingdom or Realm or Empire has a different ethic and a different value system where "what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God"? This means that what God prizes, therefore, might appear to be an abomination in the sight of children of Adam and Eve. Not unlike a father who gives a lavish feast to a selfish, undeserving, profligate son (see Luke 15:11-31).

What we consider "good" and honest and dependable are going to look very different from God's perspective. The values of God's Empire will always appear wacky and unjust and weird and maybe even wrong to the eyes of the world. That's because the "riches" of grace and love and compassion and justice and the gospel, itself, require a different kind of economy, they operate within a different kind of economy. A different kind of "oikos" or house is required of

us; it requires a heart that is healthy, a heart in the right place, a heart whose treasure is what God treasures most.

¹ D. Mark Davis's commentary on Luke 16:1-3, <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-accused-economist.html>.

² Richard Rohr, "Jesus and the Bible," Center for Action and Contemplation, <https://cac.org/midrash-2019-01-07/>.