

An Undivided Heart

Psalm 113 & Luke 16:1-13 (14-15)

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 18th September 2022

Sometimes parables give us a headache. And this parable, the Dishonest Manager, found only in Luke, is a doozy. Jesus wasn't the first to use parables, of course. In the Greco-Roman world, public speakers, politicians, and philosophers, including Socrates and Aristotle, used parables. Within Judaism, prophets and rabbis told parables. Jesus didn't create the parable form, but he was brilliant in its use. In these parables, we're given his core teaching, a glimpse into the mind of Christ. They were shocking then and should be shocking now, and if they're not shocking today, that says more about us than about Jesus and his parables.

What are parables? Yes, they're stories with a lesson. They're designed to teach us something. Yes, they're often read as allegories, with one thing standing for something else. This is probably what you learned in Church school. It's what I was taught. However, stories with lessons containing allegories rarely give one a headache. If you don't have a headache, if you're not confused, if you're not wrestling with what Jesus said and not sure how to respond, then you're not hearing the parable. And parables are *not* "example stories"; they're not morality tales telling you how to behave—as this one clearly shows. They're *parables*.

Parables pack a punch. They're supposed to generate an experience, touch us deeply, wake us up, hit us in the gut, and knock us off our feet. They function the way a koan does in Zen Buddhism. A koan is a riddle or puzzle used during meditation to help unravel greater truths about the world and oneself. It's designed to provoke, such as this famous one: "What face did you have before you were born?"

Similarly, parables make us think. They force us to wrestle with reality, with truth. They mess with the way we view the world. They are intentionally disorienting, which is probably why we want to turn them into morality tales. But then they wouldn't shock us, and they're meant to shock.

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager is headache-producing. It's a challenging text—it's so difficult that I'm not sure one should preach on it. There are so many angles, meanings, questions, loose threads, and non-sequiturs that it almost doesn't make any sense. Perhaps it's best used as a koan, a parable to reflect upon quietly, in contemplation or meditation, and not try to interpret it. It's tough to make sense of what it means—and I'm not going to venture down that rabbit hole. It's an unsettling text, appearing to justify shady business practices. And it should not be taken literally. For, surely, Jesus isn't calling his disciples to be dishonest and unethical.

The parable itself appears as a non sequitur in Luke's Gospel. It comes on the heels of three parables given in the presence of the Pharisees and scribes about recovering that which has been lost: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Luke 15). Then, in Luke 16, Jesus turns to his disciples and directs this challenging parable to them, which gives us a clue that this parable is about something else in particular. Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus has a lot to say

about money and wealth, about what we should value, give our allegiance to, and ultimately serve. We cannot have two masters; we cannot serve God and mammon—or wealth, property, material things. So, yes, on the one hand, this parable is about money and how it's used. But it's really about something else. It's about what it means to be a disciple of Christ, what Christ expects from his disciples, and what Christ wants from his disciples who live on the cusp of the new world order that Christ is bringing into the world. He refers to his disciples and followers in the coming as “children of light,” in contrast to the “children of this age.”

Jesus came announcing the inbreaking of God's Kingdom, the inbreaking of God's Realm, and God's Reign ushering in a new order. It has arrived and is on the way, and Jesus calls his disciples to be part of this new world order. The old order is passing away. Something new is on the way. Jesus pointed to it earlier in Luke's Gospel, when Jesus reads from Isaiah, at the start of his ministry, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor [or jubilee]” (Luke 4:18-19). In the economics of the new age, the coming Kingdom “we share and provide for one another in the spirit of generosity, welcoming and celebrating those who were once on the boundaries of acceptability but whom God has brought in... the hungry who get fed, the naked who are clothed, the prisoners who are visited, the thirsty who are given a drink, the Gentiles and sinners who become part of the community of the righteous. With the future community and kingdom in mind, we live the reality of the kingdom now through our present actions.”¹ And we need to be prepared for this new future.

The point of crisis, the turning point in the parable, is when the manager discovers that his job is coming to an end, and he has to figure out a way to secure his future. He acts in his present situation with his future end in mind. The manager, while dishonest, is shrewd. The dishonest manager has a shrewdness that Jesus' own disciples have yet to acquire. We need to keep our sights set on the future that God is bringing toward us, and with the same shrewdness and cunning that we might use in financial affairs to secure our well-being, we need to apply that spirit to Kingdom work.

For example, just about a year ago (October 2021), you might recall that the so-called Pandora Papers were leaked, revealing the ways that some of the wealthiest people in the world “game the system” through offshore accounts to protect and amass their wealth and avoid paying taxes (both legally and illegally). Much of their tax avoidance is described as “operating within the letter, but not the spirit, of the law.” In other words, shrewd and clever—even if not wholly ethical or righteous. Some wealthy people, like our shrewd manager, know who to turn to ensure their future: lawyers, tax accountants, and money managers that can help them exploit loopholes.

It's that spirit, that cleverness, that shrewdness that Jesus wants from his disciples. Perhaps we can call it “sanctified shrewdness,” where we utilize, access, or practice a similar kind of spirit, energy, and cleverness in our commitment to God's Reign in the world, in our service not to mammon and wealth, but to God.

Perhaps another way of getting at what I think Jesus is pointing to in this parable is the question of focus or attention. What is the object of our desire, the focus of our devotion?

What—or, better, who attracts the affections of our hearts? And I think Jesus turns to money and wealth as a gauge because he knows how attractive money and wealth can be, along with the associated power and security that comes with being wealthy, and how it inspires us to be creative and clever in how we obtain it and save it and invest it. The love of money and wealth also seduces us, dividing our focus and attention, dividing our hearts, and making us neurotic. Psychologists don't use the word "neurotic" so much these days. It was initially used to describe a split within one's personality, that is, a division, a conflict within one's soul, or an internal struggle between competing allegiances that make it difficult to live and choose and act. Jesus himself said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Luke 11:17). I like to see Jesus as a cardiologist who was concerned about the health of our hearts, hearts that can love and receive love, concerned about what becomes the object of the heart's focus, devotion, and commitment. He knows the cost of a divided heart. And it seems to me that it's this concern that is behind his teaching that we cannot serve God and mammon—not because mammon is bad but because the love of money is the source of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10). The heart thrives best with singular devotion and focus. It's striking that Luke tells us that the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, according to Luke, heard Jesus' conversation with his disciples and ridiculed him. And Jesus fired back, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight 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).

You see, even here, Jesus looks to the heart; he judges the heart with disordered affections. This is because Jesus is concerned with our hearts. And ultimately, we want to give our hearts to something larger than ourselves, someone greater than ourselves, and someone worthy of our heart's affections. This is what we want, isn't it? This is what we were created for, ultimately. And the heart comes alive when the division is healed, when the heart serves love, when the heart serves the Living God. St. Augustine (354-430) famously said in his *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

We were created to serve, to give our hearts, give our love to something other than ourselves, something greater than ourselves, created to serve something, someone greater than ourselves. It's the kind of life that was embodied by Queen Elizabeth II (1926-2022), who saw her life as a calling given by God; she was called to serve. Two days before her death, she was at work meeting with a new Prime Minister. Several days before that, she welcomed the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, welcoming one more Presbyterian minister to Balmoral Castle for the weekend, hosting more than 300 visits throughout her reign. Now, I know monarchy is complicated and complex, British imperial history deeply problematic, and the dysfunctions of the House of Windsor have been on the cover of every tabloid. Perhaps you haven't followed her funeral proceedings or don't care about the Royal Family. So, I'm hesitant about putting a spotlight on Queen Elizabeth here. Still, there is something about Queen Elizabeth and the undivided devotion to her call—and to *Jesus Christ, her Lord*—that shaped her life, that has attracted the fascination and deep respect and deep sorrow and grief in countless thousands, which we have seen unfolding in the United Kingdom, but also around the world. It's striking that the only biography the Queen fully endorsed has the title *The Servant Queen and the King She Serves* (Bible Society, 2016) by William Shawcross. She saw herself serving a greater Monarch, a greater King. That's where she placed her heart, and, I suspect, it was her "secret" all these years. Only in recent years was she more explicit about her trust in Christ.

The funeral proceedings last week in Scotland and this week in England, particularly the Queen's Lying-in-State, with people standing in queues for nearly twenty-four hours, have been extraordinary. More than the funeral for a celebrity, we must not underestimate the magnitude and significance of the event unfolding now in London. Estimates suggest that 4.1 billion people will be watching the Queen's funeral tomorrow morning, more than half the world's population. We are witnessing the most significant manifestation of ritual, myth, and religious, namely *Christian* expression, that we will probably ever see in our lifetime. A live stream feed allows you to view people making their way past the Queen's coffin. It's remarkable. There is something profound happening here. It's all profoundly symbolic and expresses something deep in the collective consciousness. In some respects, her death raises questions about the nature of our lives, how one wishes to live one's life, questions of calling and purpose, and how we stand in relation to something larger than ourselves.

What do we serve? Whom do we serve? Where are we placing our hearts? What is the Monarch, the Lord of our lives, calling us toward? What is God asking of us?



Opening of the Gospel of Luke, Greek Gospels, Byzantine, 12th century, University of Glasgow, Scotland

¹ Chelsey Harmon, Commentary on Luke 16:1-13. Center for Excellence in Preaching. <https://cepreaching.org/authors/chelsey-harmon/>.