

THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
YEAR C
SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

This parable is confusing enough without making it harder than Jesus intended it to be. We usually look to the last line in texts, in stories, in fairy tales and in jokes for the “moral of the story,” for the “punch-line,” to get the point. But in this Gospel excerpt (Lk 16:1-13), the last sentence is not part of the original parable. So, this parable is *not* about the proper use of money.

The evangelist Luke may have appended the last line to address the situation of his congregation. He is writing his gospel a generation or two after the Ascension of Christ, and by this time some rich people have joined this originally poor Church. The interaction likely concerned Luke because he is known as the evangelist of the poor *against* the rich. Perhaps he arranged his material to shape a parable as a warning about being all about mammon.

As Jesus told the story, it ended with the master (i.e. God) *commending* the dishonest steward for his prudence; and *complimenting* him and his other worldly friends for being “wiser than the children of light,” (Lk 16:8), wiser than the children of God.

What would the Lord’s original hearers have made of this very strange story? (It sounds incredible to hear Jesus praise the sinner and to disparage his faithful followers all in one “breath.”) From a contemporary viewpoint [always the wrong way to interpret ancient books and past history], consider two possibilities.

Since the steward was a middle-man or an agent who took a commission for negotiating contracts, listeners may have thought that he was being a good steward for taking a lower “cut,” so his master could at least recoup part or all of his losses. Unfortunately for that interpretation, Jesus had indicated that the steward acted unjustly.

Another possibility is that everyone knew that this was just the way business worked in the “real world.” In which case, the listeners might have yawned with impatience and shrugged, “It is what it is.” Or, they might have flared in anger at recalling the many ways that they had been treated unjustly in their lives.

Regardless, the people must have been surprised when Jesus actually praised the shady steward for his shrewdness. Could this suggest how Jesus might have looked at business practices and life in general?

Maybe Jesus had learned from experience that the world can be a pretty shabby place: full of dishonesty and deceit. But he also saw that in the right circumstances, people could be spontaneous, creative, and determined to survive. People are complicated creatures, full of both rational and irrational tendencies. Look at this crooked businessman: he had both the nerve and the good sense to forgo a short-term reward in favor of a later, larger one (Lk 16:4). When he knew that his business life was over, he had the courage to risk present baubles for a future nest-egg.

And then Jesus sadly considered the way some of his listeners were responding to their challenge. Jesus told them that the kingdom of God was at hand, that they had to make a definitive decision either for or against himself; that they could not choose both light and darkness; that they had to have the courage and good sense to trade a little disposable income for a huge heavenly retirement. Jesus must have been amazed and appalled at how so many people walked away. What a disappointment that worldly people were more faithful to their goals than spiritual people were to their goals. What a shame that people who lived in the darkness of indifference to God were thought smarter or wiser than the people whom Jesus had enlightened.

Where do we stand? Are we aware that we are merely *stewards* of this world's goods? Do we fully comprehend that we are only *managers* of our own lives: that our lives came from God and will end at God? Are we convinced that we can be called to account at any moment, and that all one has to offer the Master is whatever scraps of love can be salvaged from the rubble of one's life?

Do we have the sense to let go of "trinkets" which distract us from "the pearl of great price" (Mt 13:36)? Do we have the discipline to take the long-view?

Here's a little dark, worldly wisdom which Children of the Light need to realize and to accept: Good people often lose. Good people often lose. I tell athletes all the time: "It is more important that you learn how to lose gracefully than it is to learn how to win gracefully, because you will lose more times in life than you will win. Take the crucifixion of Christ as a lesson in point. Suffering cannot be avoided – and we learn more from it than we do from successes.

Some things really are black and white, are true or false. Every decision is important, and not least because every decision is practice for the final decision, which is irreversible.

And maybe most of all, we must learn that love is not a mutually beneficial deal or contract between two egotists. Love is losing: losing one's ego to the other.