

Engaging The World

Luke 16:1-13

September 5, 2010

I.

Two of our readings today are somewhat unique. The first is this New Testament reading from Paul's letter to Philemon. And I should tell you that it is more than just a reading from the letter to Philemon; it's the entire letter to Philemon. You just heard the shortest book of the Bible from beginning to end. It might be like eating an sandwich in one bite, but it's a small sandwich.

The story in the reading is this. The slave, Onesimus, was owned by Philemon and had run away, which was a crime punishable by death. And Onesimus had met Paul and become a Christian. So Paul, using a lighthearted tone not typical in most of his letters, appealed to Philemon to allow Onesimus to return without punishment because he now was a Christian brother.

We don't know what finally happened. Paul's point was that Onesimus' status as a Christian took precedence over his status as a slave. When matters of the world conflict with matters of faith, Paul said that the world must give way.

That same point also is part of today's Gospel reading from Luke, which I think is one of the more difficult and perplexing stories in the Bible. On the surface it seems to speak favorably about shady dealings and dishonest practices.

And as brief background, we should remember that throughout Luke's Gospel he emphasized Jesus' teachings about the unrighteous use of money and wealth. For example, in the first chapter Luke reports Jesus saying, "He has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (1:52-53).

Then Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (6:20). And later he said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" (18:24).

But Jesus never said that wealth always is a bad thing; only when it is used improperly. When we are blessed with good things we also are called to share them with others. This is a theme we frequently hear during our stewardship campaigns, and I mention it now in the context of today's unusual teaching about the use of money in our lives.

And it reminds me of an older wealthy gentleman who recently had married a young attractive woman, and was beginning to wonder whether she had married him for his money. So he asked her if she would still love him if he lost all his money. She replied, "Oh honey, don't be silly. Of course I would love you, and I would miss you terribly."

Obviously, that young woman's motives about wealth were apparent. Jesus' teaching about wealth in today's Gospel, however, is not as apparent. So let's look it in more detail.

II.

This reading sometimes is called the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, and it's about a manager of his master's business who learned he was going to lose his job. So the manager decided to cook the books with some of his master's debtors, and give them discounts so they might return the favor and take care of him later when he had no income.

In one case the manager found someone who owed his master one hundred jugs of olive oil, and he said, "Make it fifty." He found another who owed a hundred containers of wheat, and he said, "Make it eighty." And according to the way Jesus told the story the manager did this so that those people later would welcome him into their homes.

When I was a lawyer I heard about a similar scheme from another lawyer in town. One of the bookkeepers in his firm had reduced the amount of some invoices for legal services in return for a kickback from the clients from a part of the savings.

And just as the law firm eventually found out about it, the master in today's lesson also learned what his manager had done. But the fate of the manager was not what we might have expected. Listen again to how Jesus told what happened next.

Jesus said, "And 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." Jesus continued, "And 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."

Few, if any, parts of Luke's Gospel have bewildered readers more than this part of the Parable of the Dishonest Steward. And you probably would not be surprised to hear that few, if any, parts of Luke's Gospel have generated more different interpretations of its meaning.

III.

So how should we understand it? Does this story mean that we should praise shady dealings, or that we can buy our way into heaven? Of course not. That would be entirely inconsistent with everything else in the Bible.

We start by remembering that this story is a parable. That means Jesus was speaking in a symbolic way in order to make a point. This was not a narrative about something that actually happened in Jesus' experience, but rather a common teaching device that assumed certain facts for purposes of discussing causes and consequences. Case studies serve similar purposes today.

And we also should understand the parable in the context of how Jewish law affected the way people did business at the time. It was unlawful to charge any interest or finance charges on loans or purchases. This was known as usury. Don't a lot of people today wish that Jewish law applied to their credit card statements?

But people easily avoided these prohibitions. They simply increased the amounts of notes or the prices of goods to include hidden charges. Or, as we saw today, they might have taken payment in commodities such as olive oil or wheat to possibly disguise the true cost.

In addition, managers of property frequently were not paid salaries, but rather made their livings by putting their own commissions on top of the amounts of their masters' money they were able to lend, or the prices of their masters' goods they were able to sell.

Some analysts and scholars have used these ancient business practices to explain why the master commended his steward for what he did. They say that the steward might only have deducted his own commissions that would have been added on later, and thus the master was not deprived of anything to which he was legally entitled anyway.

Or they say that the reductions that the steward gave the debtors were for interest charges that were not lawful at the time, and the master had no choice but to grudgingly commend the steward for his shrewdness, at least publicly.

My belief, however, is that Jesus told the story this way in order to lead into the basic point he wanted to make. And here I think Jesus used some irony or cynicism. How many times have you heard someone say, "Yeah, right" when they actually meant the exact opposite.

That is a good explanation of what happened here. Let's go back again to Jesus' statement that "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." Then, and here is the irony, he told his disciples to make friends from dishonest wealth so that those friends would welcome them into their eternal homes.

Jesus probably was making a point by saying something in such an obviously ridiculous way that the opposite meaning, the meaning he intended, would be clear. Suppose I said, "I just love to drive in rush hour traffic." You could tell from the tone of my voice and the literal incongruity of what I said that I did not mean it, and in fact was indicating my dislike of driving during rush hour.

In the same way Jesus made the point that worldly goods contain inherent dangers, but can be wisely used. And to the extent Jesus even used the manager as an example, it only was because he was resourceful in dealing with his problem, and Jesus wanted the disciples to be equally resourceful in doing their work as they cared for the poor and spread the Gospel.

Thus, the manager was not an example to be imitated, but only an example of someone who showed initiative in worldly affairs. By extension and analogy Jesus urged the disciples to take the initiative in spiritual and godly affairs.

This idea also is expressed in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus told his disciples that "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (10:16).

IV.

And so contemporary Christians can take two messages from the parable of the Dishonest Steward. One relates to spiritual understanding and the other to practical action.

The spiritual message is that we all will be called by God to account for the content of our lives; that preparation for that time should include the prudent use now of our resources and finances, including helping the poor and needy; and that when we do so we will be living into the Christian promise of eternal life and joy.

The practical message is that we really do need to be as shrewd as serpents as we serve the church in contemporary society. Surveys show that people are more receptive to spirituality than at any time in recent history. But yet religion is being driven from the schools, excluded from the public forum, and diminished by secular activists who see faith as a threat to their agendas.

Opportunities abound for churches to wisely use their resources in new ways to make the voice of God heard. To use the terms of the reading, the children of light should be prepared to engage the children of this age on their own terms, and with a shrewd and wise use of resources the light can drive out the darkness.

Many churches effectively proclaim the Word through modern public relations strategies, cutting edge technologies, and innovative communication techniques. And even when limited financial resources do not permit full use of these possibilities, we still are called to search for creative ways to reach out to those we can bring to Christ.

So for us, today's Gospel means that we are to engage the world as we find it, not as we might prefer it to be. Jesus knew that his disciples would encounter snares and pitfalls as they continued his ministry, and he wanted them to know that through both shrewdness and faith they could deal with the world and still be true to their beliefs.

That also is a message for the church today. We are the children of light in today's Gospel. And with a shrewd and faithful use of resources the light of Christ will show the way, and we can discover anew how the Spirit can lead us. *Amen.*