

August 9, 2020

*"The Crooked Manager"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 16:1-8 (The Message Version)

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

We've been looking at the parables of our Lord Jesus Christ this summer, and I would imagine, after hearing this particular parable, it is a difficult one for many of us to understand. Because the rich man in the parable, is, once again, God. Yet, what's the bottom line here? God ends up commending, praising a crooked manager. Hmmm. So what's going on here?

Well, let me start by telling you a story that might help put today's parable in a more modern day perspective. Eugene Peterson is a pastor and author of "The Message" version of the Bible, which we read today. And he tells about an incident that happened to him while he was visiting a friend at John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. He had no luck finding a parking spot in the hospital garage, so he had to park on the street. And if you're not familiar with the area around John Hopkins, let me just say, it's not the greatest. Well, after visiting his friend, he returned to his car only to find that he had locked his keys inside. He stood there helpless, looking at his keys dangling from the ignition. He writes, "I was stumped, hands in my pocket, on a street in East Baltimore, wondering what I could do. Just then a street-wise young African-American boy about fourteen years old, came up to me and said, 'Something wrong, Mister?' I said, 'Yes, I locked my keys in the car.' He said, 'I can help you.' And he took a piece of wire out of his pocket and in about thirty seconds or less had the door open. He reached inside, then handed me my keys. I said, 'I'm sure glad you showed up.' He laughed and said, 'Is it worth ten dollars to you?' I reached for my wallet and, as I did, I commended...commended this young boy. 'Ten dollars? It's worth twenty dollars,' and I handed him the money. And as I drove away (I thought about that street smart young boy, and how he obviously survived in that neighborhood by his wits, and how he helped me by using his rather unsavory skills and shrewdness). And the parable Jesus told about a crooked manager praised for an act of dishonesty, a rascal commended for being a rascal, surfaced into my mind from my subconscious."

Now using Peterson's story as our backdrop, let's look more closely at this parable about a crooked manager. Biblical scholars have argued for centuries as to all the profound meanings of this parable. But I'm going to keep it simple with my interpretation of the story:

... there was a certain rich man, God, of course, who had an abundance of good things, and he trusted his manager to care for all he had. And that manager...that's you and me... that manager took advantage of his position by being crooked for his own personal gain. Perhaps like we do sometimes.

... so the rich master, God tells the manager that he is going to be audited. Just like we all will be someday. As St. Paul said, "Each of us will give an account to God for what we have done."

... then the manager says to himself, "Oh, oh, I'm in trouble now. I need to use my wits to find a way out of this predicament or I'll end up in jail. I'll have to come up with an angle to save myself. Because my mortal life – now keep that in mind everyone – my mortal life depends on it." So he comes up with a plan and takes action.

Now to really understand what the manager does next in this parable, we have to look at it in the framework of the culture at the time. Back then, a rich person didn't hire his manager for a wage, instead, it was more on a commission basis so to speak. For example, if the manager took a hundred jugs of olive oil out of the rich man's inventory, valued at \$1.00 each, that's \$100, he might sell them to a merchant for, say, \$2 each. That markup was kept by the manager for his troubles. And often times that markup was exorbitant. In fact, tax collectors back then operated the same way. If it was determined that a person owed the Roman government, say \$100 dollars in taxes, the tax collectors might tell that person his taxes were \$200. And the tax collector kept the difference for himself. That's why they became rich and were so hated. This practice of marking things up for personal gain was just part of the system back then. It was so prevalent that scripture refers to it as a sin. Because when tax collectors went to John the Baptist to repent, they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" To which John answered, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." And this is what the manager does. He stops collecting more than is prescribed. He goes out and tells the merchants, "You know those hundred jugs of olive oil I sold you, well, make it fifty." The manager is giving up his markup. He's doing this to make friends and curry favors, so that he'll be able to get by in this mortal life. The merchant is delighted with the reduction and probably now considers the manager a great guy, though aware that someday in the future he may have to return the favor. And the rich master equally will be satisfied because the merchant will pay him \$2.00 a piece for the fifty jugs, thus receiving the \$100 for what his olive oil is worth in the first place. So what happens next? Surprise! The manager gets commended by the master for the shrewd, smart, masterful angle he fashioned for himself. Now is this the end of the story?

Of course not, because Jesus then adds the commentary, which is really the meat of this parable:

"Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens," he says. "They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits." Other versions of this passage state it this way: "For

the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light." What Jesus is saying is that the manager got commended not because he was crooked, no, not that at all. He got commended because he was wise and did what he had to do to secure his mortal future. That's the key takeaway here. If the manager was so ingenious as to insure himself some measure of security and well being in this mortal life, a life that is ultimately going to end, shouldn't we, law abiding people of the light, disciples of Jesus Christ, want to do the same with regard to our future, our eternal life? The answer is obvious. Yes, yes! We should be wise and do all the right things to secure that eternal future. That's why Jesus said, "Be smart in the same way, but for what is *right!*"

You see, this parable serves as a wake-up call when it comes to taking an account of our spiritual lives. Are we like the crooked manager? Have we, at times manipulated people or situations for our own personal gain. Have we become self-righteous and prideful, guided by our own self-interest? Is it time for us to perhaps think: "Oh, oh, I may be in trouble. I need a plan to fix those areas of my spiritual life that are lacking: worship, prayer, service. Because my future, my eternal life, depends on it." That part of the parable is a good lesson for all of us.

Which leads to the second part of the parable that I think likely transpired. When the manager went back to the master to come clean about how he fixed the situation, and he was commended, could the master, God, have had a change of mind? Welcomed him back? Given him another chance? I like to think so based on all I know about God. Because isn't our God a God of love and mercy and forgiveness? Yes! You see, I think the master took the manager back and told him to use his abilities in the right way. To put his talents and efforts to good use. That's the way God works with all of us. As I've quoted author Max Lucado before, "God loves you just the way you are. But he refuses to leave you that way." Yes, God loves you just the way you are. But he refuses to leave you that way.

I'm going to give you part of your Christian Challenge early today. Think a minute about what an audit of your life would look like? What would God find? Now let me remind you of that beloved hymn written by English clergyman, John Newton, *Amazing Grace*. The words assure us that God's forgiveness, and our redemption are possible regardless of our past behavior, regardless of the sins or mistakes we might have committed. Newton wrote the words of *Amazing Grace* from his own personal experience. As many of you know, Newton was a slave trader. How despicable was that! And is it really that implausible to think that maybe the far-reaching consequences of his slave trading many

years ago might have had something to do with a black kid on the streets of east Baltimore, a child of the world, struggling to survive today? I think there's a direct correlation. But as the story goes... one night a terrible storm battered Newton's ship and he didn't think he would survive. I'm sure at that moment he probably thought what the crooked manager thought, "Oh, oh, I'm in trouble now. What should I do? My mortal and eternal life depend on it." So he comes up with a plan – he repents, and he goes back to the master, God, in all humility begging for mercy, and promising to change. Which he did! The ship was saved, and Newton later denounced slave trading, and even became an Anglican priest. Listen to some words of the hymn.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.*

*I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come.*

*'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far, and Grace will lead me home.*

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.*

*I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

Yes, there was once a rich man, God, who had a crooked manager. And he got information that the manager had been taking advantage of his position. The rich man asked for an accounting. The manager came clean and repented. And, I'm happy to report, the crooked manager was given another chance, this time to do what's right. Thanks be to God! Amen.

### Prayer

O Lord, we confess that sometimes we are like the crooked manager. We look out first and foremost for ourselves. And in doing so, we sometimes cross the bounds of Christ-like behavior, by what we say, what we do, and even what we think. And so we come to you with our accounting of our lives. Wanting to change, wanting to live more righteously. Thank you for your grace and mercy that offers us another chance. And please grant us your strength to make the changes we need to make in our lives. Knowing that this will affect us, not only now, but for eternity. In Christ's name we pray, amen.