

17th Sunday in Pentecost

23 September 2007

Church of the Savior

Orange City, Iowa

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Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. LUKE 16.9

The Faithful Servant

The weird but wonderful film *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* documents singer Jim White's odyssey across the cultural fringes of the American South in quest of people "lonely for God" and for "the Holy Ghost, alive and awake and present, even if wearing the clothes of crazy religious people." At one point he muses that he is "looking for the gold tooth in God's crooked smile." That came to mind as I tried to understand the parable of the unjust steward, looking for the grace and gospel hidden in it. "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes." How's that for advice? It was a relief to skim the commentaries and find that everyone describes today's text as the most difficult of Jesus' parables, and to see that no one has a slam-dunk interpretation of it. It looks like one of those passages where some obvious key to understanding Jesus' words must have been there for his hearers in mid-first century Israel, but is now lost to us, and maybe even to Luke, struggling with them in a different place and time. Why, in the parable, does the rich man commend the dishonest manager? Why, commenting on the parable, does Jesus present the sleazy manager as a model for faithful discipleship? It's a puzzle and we don't seem to have all the pieces. But let us have faith, and sin boldly.

I believe that the most helpful move we can make to see why the rich man praises his corrupt steward is to realize that this is the ancient Mediterranean world, so the rich man's biggest concern is not his wealth, but his *honor*. In that culture, the wrongdoing, even if only alleged, of anyone in a man's household—wife or child, servant or slave—was a black mark on his honor and cried out to be rectified by some public display that erased his shame. This mentality lives on even today, in those horrific “honor killings” where the father of an Arab Muslim family murders a daughter who has dishonored him merely by being seen, unescorted, with a man. The rich man does not detect financial irregularities in the books. Some unnamed person reports that his manager is cheating him and that is enough to fire him. He does not say, “*Give me an accounting of your management, so I can see if these reports are true and fire you if they are!*” He says, “*Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer!*” The report that he is being cheated dishonors him, and dismissing his manager is necessary to restore his reputation, or at least to mitigate his dishonor.

The manager, facing unemployment and destitution, comes up with a plan: “*I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed...people may welcome me into their homes.*” He approaches the debtors and makes deals for repayment, drastically discounting what they owe his master. On standard interpretations, herein lies his dishonesty: he cheats his boss to make a golden parachute. However, it's not clear how this works. What does he mean by “*they may welcome me into their homes?*” Does he really expect to parlay these favors, substantial as they are, into not having to work any

more? Does he think these favors will entitle him to live off these folks for the rest of his life? Or does he think that, once it becomes widely known how he has cheated his employer, someone else will want to hire him as *their* manager? If this is what he thinks, then he is foolish. Yet his master commends him for acting shrewdly. If he has tried to save his own skin by cheating his master even *more*, it's hard to see why the master would *commend* him for doing so, even if he recognizes how clever he is. He does not react with, "*I was right about you, you crook!*" The rich man acts as though he has changed his mind, as though now he thinks this is a *good* manager, after all. You want shrewdness in someone you pay to manage your holdings, but not if he uses it to rob you. What the rich man says makes no sense if what matters to him is the money this crooked character cost him before and is costing him now. He is not going to praise him for cheating him *again*. But what he says makes sense when the focus shifts from lost money to lost honor, *if* the favors the manager has done for the debtors restores his employer's tainted honor.

It is plausible to think that it does. When, out of the blue, the manager approaches the debtors and offers them drastic discounts on what they owe, they will see him not as acting on his own, but simply as his employer's agent. If they think he is freelancing, they have no reason to pay him even the reduced amounts he asks for. So they receive this unexpected largess as a gift from the rich man. In this culture, it was in fact a common practice for the rich to enhance their reputations, and thus their honor, by the magnanimous *ad hoc* distribution of gifts to the poor. There are neighborhoods in New York and Boston, where Mafia bosses, living by a similar archaic honor code, still do

this. The manager dreams up a scheme to save himself. He'll make his employer appear fantastically generous, enhancing his reputation by portraying him as so fabulously well-off he can on a whim write off big chunks of their debts. At worst, he'll be seeking a new position with a reputation for being a shrewd manager, one who knows how to make his boss look good. At best, he'll show his employer that he's worth keeping, because he is sharp enough to restore the honor his malfeasance cost him and in so doing to bring him even greater honor. When, in crisis and under judgment, he cuts the discount deals with his employer's clients, he is no longer trying to serve two masters. Before, the manager did try to serve two masters, officially his employer but unofficially his desire for his employer's money. Now he is wholeheartedly pursuing his employer's interests because he sees that they coincide with his own. The manager is praised for wisely seeing to his interests, now that they are one with those of his employer. His fate is bound up with his master's. To save himself he must save his employer's honor. He has become his master's faithful servant.

One difficulty in interpreting the parable is that it is not obvious where it ends, where it is no longer the rich man speaking, and where it is Jesus talking about the parable, drawing lessons from it. My bet is that the parable ends with, "*And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly,*" and that Jesus continues, now observing, "*For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.*" What contrast is he making? There were plenty of foreign absentee landlords in first century Israel, and Jesus' audience, mostly poor peasants, would have been familiar with, and in many cases would have worked for,

their hired managers. I can imagine those hearing Jesus' story taking it for granted that its characters are a rich gentile landowner and his hired steward. Jesus says that *these* are the kind of people that are wily enough to grasp what wealth is good for: it's for winning friends and influencing people. That's *all* money is good for. It doesn't have any inherent value. Having it or the things it buys won't do you any real good. There's no sense hoarding it, worrying about holding on to it, taking care to spend it cautiously, or getting bent out of shape when someone cheats you out of some of it. It's good only for getting rid of in ways that impress other people. Above all, there's no reason to think having it marks you as blessed by God, better or holier than the unwashed many who have to get by without it. There's nothing *sacred* about it: it's *just money*. Denying its importance, its spiritual power, blowing it on a big party (as a recent "Professor of the Year" infamously did with his prize money) apparently is the epitome of Christian stewardship. The *tradition* warns against greed, against wanting too much money, or wanting money too much. But *Jesus* warns against taking it seriously in the first place, showing it any respect at all.

Also, I suspect that Jesus' audience would have resonated to his default characterization of wealth as "dishonest" (the word is literally *unjust*.) Like peasants everywhere, they would have taken it for granted that the rich are rich *because* the poor are poor, and that the only honest money is what you get for hard physical work, not for renting, lending, managing, buying and selling, and so on. This is bad economics, but in the context it's good theology. For we hear Jesus speaking on behalf of the crowds of ritually unclean, morally suspect, contemptible poor folk against the well-off, theologically correct, and

religiously pure establishment. Blessed are the poor...of all people! What Jesus says would have galled the powers-that-be in Jerusalem: the despised gentiles know better than you how to use their wealth; they at least know enough not to imagine it is a sign of divine favor. They know to use it for the worldly purposes it's good for.

What, though, to make of the explanation, "...so that when it is gone they may welcome you into their eternal homes?" I suspect Jesus indulges in sarcasm here. It's implausible that he would have seen the friends to be won by sharing the wealth as really having *eternal*—or *heavenly*, as the word also means—homes to invite anyone to. I wonder whether Jesus might have said this in a tone of voice that expressed the opposite of the word's literal meaning, and that emphasized the fact that *nothing* of ultimate importance is at stake in wealth, except, of course, being wise enough to avoid imagining that there *is*. (This reading is, perhaps, supported by the fact that the Greek term we read as "homes," is σκηνας, *tent*, that most *impermanent* of dwellings.)

Jesus asks, "*If you are not faithful in this small thing, this ultimately minor matter of money, then how can you be entrusted with things that really matter?*" What is it to be faithful with what God gives us? Taking as our model the shrewd manager who moved from being dishonest to being faithful, we should spend whatever God gives us in ways that embody, and make visible to one and all, his extravagant generosity, and the good news that he forgives our debts. This vindicates the honor of *our* master.

It's crucial to the story that the rich man's steward became a worthwhile servant not when he went from being dishonest to honest, or unjust to just—we don't, as a matter of fact, have any reason to think he did—it was when he forgave the debts of his boss' debtors, when he gave what was not by rights his to give. Keep in mind that in the parable, everyone came out ahead: the manager got back in the master's good graces and avoided being fired, the master had his honor restored and his reputation as a rich and generous guy enhanced, and the debtors got a big break. But no one got justice. No one got what he deserved. But everyone got more than he had any reason to expect. This is the strange world we are called to as followers of Jesus. God's world, where justice doesn't count. Only love and mercy matter. The shrewdness of Jesus' faithful servants might look crazy, even disreputable, in the eyes of the world. For it's about forgiving and giving without regard for who deserves what.

There's a Russian folk tale about a miserable old lady who was notoriously selfish. Beggars who made the mistake of coming her door were sent away empty handed with the miserly woman's angry words ringing in their ears. But one day a beggar turned up who was especially hungry and persistent; he wasn't going to take *no* for an answer. Finally she chased him away; in a rage she grabbed an onion and flung it at him. In due time the wretched woman died and proceeded to the nether regions of hell. But one day from far above a hand appeared, reaching down, down into the deepest hell. In it was the onion. "*Take hold of this and be saved!*" calls a voice from heaven. She did, and with it she was drawn up out of hell into heaven.

There's another, darker version of the tale: The old woman is in hell and complaining bitterly to God about it; a respectable woman like her does not, she insists, belong there. God asks her what acts of charity she did in her lifetime. For ages she cannot think of any but at last she recalls one. She tells Him she once gave an onion to a poor beggar. God then lowers an onion into the fires of hell and tells her to grasp hold of it. She does; and as she is being lifted out of hell, others also desperately grasp the onion. She turns to them and screams, "*This is for me!*" and kicks them off. She immediately falls off the onion herself and drops out of sight, back into deepest hell.

Each week we pray, "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" We do not, of course, think that God's forgiving us *depends* on our forgiving others. Or that God's endless generosity to us is conditional even on our meager generosity to others. God's love, God's forgiveness, unlike ours, is utterly unconditional. God loves and accepts us, he gives and forgives without limit, just because of who he is, not because we deserve it, not with our good behavior, not with our spiritual discipline, not even with our repentance. But when we refuse to forgive as we have been forgiven, to give as God has given to us, we make ourselves ridiculous, and give ourselves a taste of hell, acting as if we deserve God's favor while someone else does not. We make ourselves pretty much useless as God's servants. Instead, let us be God's faithful servants and take hold of his unstinting mercy, giving and forgiving as recklessly as he does.

Amen.