

Luke 16:1-13 9.18.25 14 Pentecost Bill Uetracht

Sometimes the Bible causes you to say, “Hmmm.” Sometimes it makes you go, “Huh?” Sometimes the Bible is just weird, bizarre, incomprehensible. Many of you will read portions of the Bible and will exclaim, “I don’t get it,” often blaming yourself for your lack of understanding. I just must be too dumb.

No! Sometimes the Bible is a conundrum. It’s not always clear. It can even be contradictory. Sadly, some people want to sell it as the answer book for all human problems, enigmas, conundrums. Got an issue? There’s a verse for you. The problem will be taken care of. But sometimes it feels like the Bible creates more problems, rather than solving them. Sometimes it just wants to make you go, “Huh?”

Today is one of those sometimes. Clarity is not what we are given today. Yes, the first reading from Amos seems quite clear: Don’t take advantage of the poor. Don’t make life all about making money. And the second reading in First Timothy, a book in my opinion that sometimes makes life too simple, is pretty straightforward today as well. At least, I think it is. Pray for everybody in leadership positions. Why? We want an orderly life, and God wants everybody to be saved, even the king, who is slow to get it, slow to comprehend that he is not the center of the universe. Pray for him so that he figures that out. A little convoluted, but relatively straightforward.

But that cannot be said about our gospel reading. This text is odd, bizarre, a story that makes us go, “Huh?” It’s a story about a rich man. Jesus is going to tell another story about a rich man next week. In Luke, he often has a lot to say about money and the rich.

The rich man in this story is really rich. I don't know. Maybe a billionaire. He's got all kinds of property, a steward, who probably is a slave, and all kinds of debtors. Honestly, most people were poor at the time of Jesus. Most folks were in debt, some of them owing "their souls to the company store," which is probably the case in the parable.

The owner finds out that his steward has been squandering his property, causing the owner to demand from the steward an accounting of his management, which leads to the steward being fired and in a position of unemployment and a lack of income, and thus probably the means to pay off his own debt. The manager is in a crisis. What should he do?

Well, he decides to squander even more of the owner's money. He calls upon the owner's debtors and cuts what they owe by fifty or twenty percent. Doing so would mean that the steward would have established some connections for the time of his unemployment. These debtors, since he had been kind to them, will like him and thus welcome him into their homes. Sounds like hanky panky to me, very illegal, opportunistic.

Well, when the owner hears about this, he throws him into the slammer...no, he commends the steward for what he has done. Huh? I didn't see that one coming. I was expecting some very harsh language from the owner, his using his power to punish the steward.

And then Jesus, in commenting on the actions of the dishonest manager says: "I tell you, make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they (whoever *they* is) will welcome you into the eternal homes." Huh? What the heck? Use ill-gotten wealth to manipulate people, to get eternal rewards. I mean,

really. I fully understand why the Worship and Music Ministry chose three question marks (???) as the theme for day. This is a weird story.

And then Jesus ends the story with some sayings that on their own sound pretty good, but I am not sure how they connect to the odd story. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much, and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest in much.” That seems true. “No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth/ mammon.” That’s hard to hear, but it’s probably true. The parable seems to be talking about money in some way, and the sayings are clearly about money. I guess they are connected.

I do know that a writer like Luke probably had access to a source that contained sayings of Jesus, so maybe it makes sense that he wanted to use the sayings that he had sitting around. Maybe his English professor told him that he needed to have so many quotes in his gospel in order to pass the class. I don’t know. But I do know it’s hard for my little brain to bring all of this together.

Maybe that is part of the point. Maybe life with Jesus isn’t always clear. While some folks think that religion should clarify everything, should make thinking, choosing, and behaving a matter of this or that, either/or, I suspect that life with Jesus is much more complex. I note that in some corners of Christianity the heroes seem to get it all right. They look really good. They succeed. They appear to be morally pure. But is this what Jesus is really after? *After* all, he seems to hang out with people who don’t always fit that profile.

One thing to note about Jesus' stories is that his heroes aren't always the moral ones. That's definitely the case in Luke today. The hero is not moral, but shrewd. Even the master is taken not by his morality, but his shrewdness.

Is shrewdness our calling sometimes? Do we have to, as Luther put it, sin boldly on occasion? Do religious people try too hard sometimes not to sin, as if they can get beyond the complexities of life and choosing? Do we have something to learn from the children of this age who perhaps aren't as naïve as we are?

The reign of God, which Jesus initiates, is a wild one. It's unlike anything that we humans create. It turns our creations upside down. It makes us go: "Huh! Who would have thunk?" It makes us tell different stories, have different heroes, think and behave differently. It invites us into a crisis (some people call today's parable a "crisis parable"), a crisis that forces us to respond *now* to its calling.

To live in keeping with the reign of God is to be *prepared* not always to *be prepared* for what life brings us next. It is to be called to respond shrewdly now to the loss of your job. To live in keeping with the reign of God is to be compelled to adapt to life's fluctuations and deviations. When you travel with Jesus, there are going to be lots of those. To go with Jesus is to go where love and grace go. And truthfully, love and grace sometimes are wacky. They often are wild and weird. Love and grace receive life's messiness. For Luke's Jesus, this is a matter of forgiving debts.

Throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus is always forgiving people. Even when he is dying, he is forgiving people. "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." To be a part of the

reign of God that Jesus inaugurates is to be taken into the messiness of debt owing and into the grace of debt cancellation.

Now, you may want to be in the place where all is sweet and right and morally pure. You may want to make heroes out of the folks who have no debts and need no cancellation. But this is not the kind of life that Jesus will lead you into. He will take you into a life that will cause you to say, “Huh?” Life with him won’t be about clarity. It may not even be about purity. It certainly won’t be about money. Rather, it will be about the urgency of grace, forgiveness, and love, which means that it is going to be a little messy, which means that sometimes we are going to have to think on our feet, which means that we are going to need to be ready to be forgiven and to forgive.

This will be a complex life. It will be a life that will cause us frequently to scratch our heads. But I promise you that it will be an adventure of a lifetime. When grace, love, and forgiveness lead the way, you never know where you are going to be taken, the authentic life you are going to experience, the fun you are going to have.