

The Curious Case of the Crooked Steward

As you all know well by now, I think, I love a good story. During my career in the theatre, when I had the opportunity to contribute to or make decisions about what scripts would be produced or which I would direct, I always gravitated towards those that told a good story. Others might be more interested in musicals with lots of popular songs or scripts that gave the opportunity for them to show off original directoral concepts or technical legerdemain but story was always the overriding factor for me. One of my delights as a preacher is getting to explore the wonderful stories in the Bible, especially those stories told by that masterful storyteller of the first century, Jesus of Nazareth. For me, part of the wonder of stories and of Jesus' stories in particular, is that they convey truth in a way that cannot be reduced to propositions. The truth of a story must be sought and felt. It will be slightly different for each reader or listener. The truth of stories can be wild and unpredictable. Today's parable from Jesus is one of the most peculiar he told, strange, confusing and memorable. Its oddness and sense of mystery makes me think of another of my favorite storytellers, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, so in a tribute to Conan Doyle's famous Sherlock Holmes stories, I'm referring to today's parable as "The Curious Case of the Crooked Steward." In my analysis of this story this morning, I'll offer what glimpses of truth I've caught but I do not suggest that my view will be normative or even normal. I do hope that you'll share some of my views but I hope even more that you'll come to some different conclusions that you'll share with me later.

Let's begin our investigation of this curious case this morning with a look at how the story might have been heard by the men and women following Jesus. Jesus begins this story the same way he begins the next parable recorded in Luke, "There was a rich man." That's our first clue. There is no doubt that in the story of the Rich Man and the Beggar Lazarus, that the rich man is a bad guy. In fact, in the whole book of Luke, which discusses money more than any other Gospel, wealth is always suspect, something that strains a person's relationship with God. "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God," Jesus says in Luke 18. The mindset reflected in Luke is that of the first century Jewish peasant. If you are rich, you probably got that way by ripping off other people and you are probably a Roman collaborator. You can work hard and honestly and be comfortable, but if you are rich, you've got too much. You're not fulfilling your social and religious obligation to care for the poor. There are no Horatio Alger stories in first century Palestine.

So Jesus' audience probably heard the story like this: A rich gangster lives a life of luxury in Jerusalem. His wealth comes from estates in the countryside which are run by stewards while he parties in the city. All the hard work of planting and harvesting is done by poor honest people whose grandparents owned the land but lost it in payment of debts. Now they are tenant farmers, paying unreasonable amounts of rent in produce and buying everything they need from the landowner's company store at inflated prices. They can never make quite enough and so they are slipping further and further into debt with the landowner, working harder and harder and getting more and more behind. As the old saying goes, "The faster I goes, the behinder I gets." They rarely see the landowner but mostly deal with the steward, a man who grew up with them but was smart enough to get the education to keep the books and unscrupulous enough to play along with the landlord.

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He's the one who collects the exorbitant rents, runs the company store and ignores their pleas for help.

But the steward gets in trouble with the landowner for wasting money. He's lived too well too long to live by manual labor. He knows he can't rely on the mercy of the farmers—they see him as in league with the landowner and aren't likely to feel sorry for him after years of poor treatment. But he comes up with an ingenious plan. The landlord hasn't notified his tenants that the steward is being replaced—he never talks to them anyway. So the steward calls them in and says, "How much do you owe the boss? We're going to forgive your interest." In one fell swoop, he's made the landlord look like a generous hero and made himself look good by extension.

So, when the landowner comes to collect his take at the end of the week, he gets quite a surprise. The roads leading to the estate are lined with villagers cheering his name. There may even be palm fronds in the road. So when he gets to the villa and discovers what's going on, what's he going to do? Turn out the steward, say "it's all a big mistake, you still owe all that interest" and turn the crowd against him? Or enjoy his new-found popularity and respect, like the Godfather waiting for grateful petitioners to kiss his ring? In that society, honor was paramount, so he overlooks the lost revenue and praises the steward for being as big a scoundrel as he himself is. Or, to borrow an image from another movie, he looks at the steward and says "Casso yol iquola ipradol conquigol—yopong chong aripa." Oh, sorry. In that movie there were subtitles. That's Jabba the Hutt in "Return of the Jedi" and it translates as "This bounty hunter is my kind of scum—fearless and inventive." If you think that the landowner being willing to accept his losses for the sake of his perceived honor is odd or unbelievable, just consider the place of corporate honor in our times. How much do modern corporations spend on public relations, marketing and, the current buzz word, "branding"? How many millions did that tobacco company spend over 30 years in sponsoring what was known in NASCAR as the Winston Cup? Has anybody been to a game lately at Safeco Field or Qwest Field? Why does the NFL so relentlessly promote their involvement with United Way? Why did the Rockefellers and the Carnegies and the Mellons establish foundations and build libraries and universities? Image is everything, today as then. The steward is off the hook. He's made the boss look good and made himself a bunch of friends in the process.

So clearly we have a very flawed hero in this parable. That might seem odd to us but Jesus is using a classic story-telling formula, the exploits of the trickster-hero. Nearly all societies have a tradition of stories about a rogue that everyone loves. For the ancient Greeks, it was Prometheus, who stole fire to benefit human beings. For the Norse, it was Loki. Native Americans, depending on their location, tell stories about Coyote or Raven. I grew up hearing stories about Br'er Rabbit and seeing the antics of his first cousin, Bugs Bunny. Jesus' audience would have loved a story about a trickster who took advantage of his rich boss.

The landlord praises the steward because he had done wisely or shrewdly or astutely, depending on your translation, and Jesus adds "because the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." Now, what does that mean? Do you

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remember the description of Noah in the book of Genesis? Genesis 6:9 says, "Noah was a just man and upright in his generation." It doesn't mean that Noah was perfect, as you know if you read his whole story. It's just that he was a good man compared to the world around him. It's like the story of the preacher who was approached by two men who offered a thousand dollars for his church if he would do their brother's funeral. The problem was, all three men were notorious in the community for their sinful lives and the brothers stipulated that in his eulogy the preacher had to refer to the deceased as a saint! On the day of the funeral, the preacher got up and said: "This man was a drunk. He was a cheat. He was a thief and a scoundrel, but in comparison to his brothers, he was a saint!"

The steward has cheated his employer, he's been dishonest. But according to the values of his circle—his generation, he acted decisively and wisely and Jesus feels it worthwhile to point out. Remember, Jesus also advised his disciples to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." The steward's conclusions are far from innocent, but at least he's using his brains and taking action on what he thinks up. It's a reminder that thinking, planning, being wise, can be a kingdom activity. As one writer puts it, "Christians are called to be born again, not born yesterday." We remember Solomon because of his wisdom; we study the book of Proverbs. In Isaiah's vision, God says, "Come, let us reason together," and Luke tells us in the book of Acts that Paul reasoned with Felix about salvation. Perhaps, at least in part, Jesus told this story to recommend shrewdness, careful reasoning.

And the result of the shrewdness of this child of this world is, after all, mercy. Debts have been forgiven. Loads have been lightened and lives made easier. For those peasant farmers who'd fallen further and further behind on their debts to the landowner, the partial forgiveness of their staggering debts must have brought new hope that some day they would be free and clear. Jesus taught us to ask our Father to forgive us our sins in the same way that we forgive debts. The steward forgave for his own purposes, to save his job. Do we, the children of light, forgive as much for the Lord's purposes, to bring brothers and sisters back into fellowship, perhaps? Or do we spend our time calculating debts of money and honor, keeping score against those whom Jesus calls us to forgive seventy times seven times? We must ask ourselves, is there someone in our lives this morning that we are keeping score against?

"The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light," Jesus said. Could he have meant that the children of this world are better able to succeed in the things that are important to them than we are at the things that are important to God? Are we operating wisely within the scope of the Christian faith, using all of the mental and spiritual power available to us to be faithful? Are we doing justice and loving mercy? Are we, in the words of the great preacher William Barclay, "as eager and ingenious in (our) attempt(s) to attain goodness as the man of the world is in his attempt to attain money and comfort?"

Jesus says we are to make ourselves friends with, as the King James Version puts it, the mammon of unrighteousness, with dishonest wealth. Does he mean we should lie and cheat and steal and bribe people with our ill-gotten gains? Of course not. In this context, all money is dishonest. It's the ultimate trickster, untrustworthy. When we have money,

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somehow we think we'll always have enough but as soon as we rely on it, it seems to slip away. It enslaves the greedy. Jesus is making a joke here which English translations can't capture. The word "mammon" is a word from the Aramaic language which Jesus and his disciples spoke. It comes from a root word meaning "trust." In a barter society, you had to trust that any money you were given really was good for its stated value in grain or oil or other goods. So Jesus says, "Use 'the mammon of unrighteousness,' that thing you trust that you can't really trust for a good purpose. Make friends with what you have." In fact, Luke records that Jesus has been telling his disciples how to do this all along. Look through Luke's Gospel: "If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have one. If you have extra food, feed someone hungry. Don't cheat other people or complain about your wages. Love your enemies. Lend to people without expecting anything in return. Throw a dinner party and invite the poor and the disabled?" That's how Jesus says to make your money worth something in God's kingdom.

Our money doesn't matter much to God. Our Father owns the cattle on a thousand hills. It is a small thing compared to how we love God and how we love our neighbors. But Jesus knew that how we use our money is a pretty good indication of what our priorities are. Are we faithful to the kingdom in how we use our financial wealth? As Jesus points out, it's not even really ours. Financial wealth doesn't belong to us for eternity—as the famous play reminds us, *You Can't Take it With You*. As Jesus tells us, when we stand before the throne, it will be with the question, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison?" Will we have used our assets to do justice and mercy or to feather our own nests?

To make his final point, Jesus points out a commonplace truth. No servant can serve two masters. If you've ever tried to hold two jobs, you certainly know the truth of this. You will give your best effort to one and the other will get the leftovers, no matter what your best intentions. There is a hilariously funny old play, "The Servant of Two Masters," written by Carlo Goldoni in 1744 in the style of the *Commedia dell'arte*, which is still being produced around the world today. In it, the trickster character, the rascally and ever-hungry servant, Truffaldino, hires himself out to two masters at the same time. He soon discovers that despite all his wiles he simply cannot serve them both successfully as he is beaten again and again for neglecting his duties with one or the other or for mixing up their commands. Every time he tries to enjoy the fruit of his labors with a good meal, he is interrupted by a directive from one of his two masters. What looked to Truffaldino like the ultimate meal ticket leaves him hungrier than ever and bruised in the bargain. We are all servants of something. As Bob Dylan sang, *You Gotta Serve Somebody*. We all serve the thing that matters most in our lives. U.S. currency bears the motto, "In God We Trust." Do we really? Do we trust and serve God or do we trust in the cold, hard cash with the words on it, spending all our days and all our energy in pursuit of it?

Have we given as was given to us, loved as the Master loved us? Remember, the shrewd steward brought his Lord's debtors in and forgave them the interest on their notes. But for us, there is a far better word than that. There is the Good News of Jesus Christ. When we show Jesus our bills, the lists of our mistakes and misdeeds, all the petty things we've done to hurt other people, the opportunities we've missed to help, the things hidden in our

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hearts that keep us from true relationship with the Father, Jesus says, “That’s OK. Your debts are forgiven in full.” You see, in the eyes of the Pharisees of his day or of legalists of any time, Jesus is a bit of a trickster, too. Just as the steward had no authority to forgive his boss’s tenants, so the Pharisees said Jesus had no authority to forgive sins. But he did anyway. Jesus knew what the Pharisees didn’t—that there is a divine roguery based on love, that God’s love is wild and prodigal and overflowing. God doesn’t play according to the rules humans dream up. God loves us regardless of what the rules say we have done or not done. And, so, God is willing to forgive. That’s what Jesus knew.

For those who do not understand God’s forgiving love, this story will always be a mystery. But for us, one message at least should be clear. Jesus has inaugurated the Kingdom of God, brought it near to us. That means it can never be business as usual again. Like the steward, we must abandon our comfortable lives of pursuing the world’s wealth and go to everyone we can find with a word of forgiveness and love. That is the shrewdness and wisdom of God, which the world does not understand but needs anyway. We must serve the Lord our God with everything we have, loving with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength. Our loving Creator and the healing of all creation is to be our vision, our all, our light. That is the true life, the life that God wants us to have and the life God wants us to share. Thanks be to God.