

Two Masters
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13
The Rev. Layne Brubaker
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
September 18, 2022

Over the past couple of week's, you have heard Pastor Scott mention that a theme/mission of our congregation is to *Journey into the Heart of God*- or said another way a time for us to "sink" ourselves into God. (There was a hand motion.) The purpose of this work is for our congregation to grow deeply rooted into God's love and Grace. And as Scott said last week, "when we consciously and intentionally dwell and abide in the heart of God, over time, our hearts and our lives will begin to take on the character of the quality of God's heart."

There are many different routes and vehicles that we will be facilitating this journey- different spiritual practices like contemplation, prayer, meditation, active listening, Bible Study and more.

I would like to suggest that one route to journey into God's heart is intentionally engaging with the teachings of Jesus. Jesus' go to pedagogy was the telling of parables, which most of you know are short fictional short stories that generally do not have clear meaning; rather, Jesus' parables often leave you with more questions than answers and they have a way of sticking in your mind causing you to think about them throughout your day. Maybe you even wake up thinking about one. Maybe you encounter a situation in your day-to-day life and suddenly Jesus' parable takes on a new meaning. Our culture values clarity and being concise, and parables often feel more like riddles or puzzles, which is the point. They are meant to stick with you, for you to "chew on them for awhile". In this way a parable might be like a fertilizers to our spiritual roots. They stay with us and help our roots grow deeply into the soil of our spiritual lives.

So with that in mind I invite all of you to join me in today's parable. Let's go on a journey together and examine the pieces of one of the most puzzling parables in the New Testament.

To begin I think this parable suffers from its placement in the Gospel of Luke. It immediately follows the Parable of the Prodigal Son which is one of the most well-known and beloved parables in all of the gospels. The prodigal Son has everything that today's parable lacks, it's characters are relatable, it's emotional, and it's convicting. You walk away from that parable wanting to receive God's loving and warm embrace like a father welcoming his son home.

Today's parable is the opposite. After a first reading of this parable your first response might be... huh? Did I read that I correctly? Did Luke mean to write this? Was Jesus having a bad day?

One commentator states:

It is far easier to comment on this text than to preach on it. A commentary can wrestle with tension and the confusion it produces, without the resolution or clarity commonly associated with a sermon. (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-25-3/commentary-on-luke-161-13-5>)

Another commentator: None of the parables of Jesus has baffled interpreters quite like the story of the dishonest steward. (Feasting on The Word)

or

“Most likely there are as many perspectives and interpretations of this parable as there are readers- it is not exaggeration that this parable’s meaning has stumped even the best and most creative interpreters of Scripture.” (Feasting on The Word)

From the very beginning it is unclear if Jesus is condemning the protagonist or if Jesus is lifting the protagonist up as a hero! And I think that is the point of this particular parable. “The reader is left to struggle for meaning.” (*Feasting on The Word*) This is not a parable that leads to certainty; rather it is a parable that invites us to sit in the discomfort of questions and let the Holy Spirit guide our discernment. It is a story that we can come back to over and over again asking the Holy Spirit to teach and guide. This parable teaches us to be open to correction and open to seeing the story through different lenses each time we come back to it.

So spoiler alert! I do not intend to clear up all the loose ends of this story! Rather, I hope to engage your curiosity and imagination with this parable and hopefully together we can all reflect on the ways this story might challenge us.

Our parable opens with two characters: A rich man and his manager, and for some reason (we are not told why) the manager is accused of wasting the Rich Man’s possessions. The Rich man calls the manager to give account of the books and notifies the manager he is fired.

The manager, realizing that he has lost his job, immediately gets strategic, thinking I need a plan. He is self-aware enough to know that he is not capable (or maybe willing) to do manual labor and he has too much pride to become a beggar, so he hatches a plan and acts quickly. He strategically decides that what he needs going forward is goodwill from his community and neighbor’s. So, he summons his master's debtors one by one, asking, 'How much do you owe my master? And then one by one he reduces the debtor’s bill, some by 20% and other’s up to 50%. *Interesting* We readers are left to sit and wonder whether or not this is an honorable thing to do.

We don’t get any insight into why the manager makes this strategic choice; there are endless interpretations of what is going on here. In fact, the history of interpretation of this text has named this parable “The Dishonest Steward” meaning that historically this parable is interpreted with the lens that the manager is in the wrong. He is dishonest because he is mismanaging the funds of the Rich Man. The problem with this historical interpretation is the reader is left wondering why Jesus lifts this guy up as a model to follow. Is Jesus really encouraging us to be like a dishonest person? Or is there more going on.

To try to understand this parable one commentator suggests that we *need a mini-course on the economics of Roman-occupied Galilee in the first century. Rich landlords and rulers were more like loan-sharks, using exorbitant interest rates to amass more land and to disinherit peasants of their family land which was in direct violation of biblical covenantal law. The rich man along with his manager were most likely both exploiting poorer folks. Jesus' hearers would have known that the debt contracts in the parable included exorbitant interest and were unethical in their very nature.*

So, the question we ask is did the manager cancel debt to correct his own bad behavior or was it a way to continue mismanaging The Rich Man's money even more. In other words, "stick it to the man on his way out?!?" Or possibly is it both. Did the manager as one commentator suggest "use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house".

Did the manager, learning he is to be fired, experience a sort of conversion experiencing a new orientation to his community rather than allegiance to wealth. When he learned that he was fired he learned that he could no longer rely on his own power and wealth. An old supervisor of mine used to say "we don't change until it hurts bad enough" and so maybe when this man was fired he was able to see his participation in an oppressive system and did what he could to self-correct. He changed the rules of the game to bring a bit of justice and reconciliation to those he had previously harmed.

But then we get to the most puzzling part of the story - verse 8. By all accounts verse 8 is the most confusing part of this parable. Verse 8 states:

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.

Again - What? Verse 8 has two separate but equally complicated sentences. The first is that the Rich Man is impressed by the Manager's strategic move. And there are many different interpretations of why he was impressed. Maybe he saw himself in the move. Player knows Game sort of thing, he was impressed by the strategy and knew he made his own money by acting in these sort of strategic ways. Or Maybe the Rich Man knowing biblical law was convicted by the manager's action and was impressed by the man's choice to reduce the owed debt. This one is open to debate!

The second sentence - Jesus' commentary on the interaction gives us even more to consider. Jesus continues the usage of the word Shrewd and compliments the "children of this age" over the "children of the light" for being more shrewd. I wonder if Jesus is telling us that people of faith live in complex times and will have to act shrewdly (or strategically) for the purposes of God's Kingdom. We cannot remove ourselves or detach from the messiness of this world. We cannot eject ourselves from the game; however, we can learn to play by different rules. Penny Nixon States: *Jesus is pointing to the harsh reality that there is no way to be honest in a system that is already excessively unjust and dishonest. The telling of this parable may in itself be a shrewd way to unveil the gross dishonesty of a system that cheats and robs*

the poor daily. The manager acted shrewdly by exhibiting sharp judgment of a system that would otherwise have left him out in the cold. (Feasting on the Word)

The final verse in our Gospel text today is the one sentence that we do in fact gain clarity - in Jesus summary of the parable he says

“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.”

So, after sitting with this parable all week and turning it over and over in my mind I will tell you what I hear Jesus telling me. I hear Jesus saying that in the end we learn that all along there was another character in the parable. Along with the Rich Man and The Manager there is another Master, and that master is God. According to Jesus we cannot serve both. At the beginning of the parable the manager was serving and devoted to The Rich Man (a symbol for the value systems of our world) and he came up short in The Rich Man’s game, for whenever we serve the masters of this world the game will always catch up to us for the masters of this world demand allegiance but do not give us life. The Manager converts and chooses to live differently. He chooses to live in reliance on community and works to align the world with his new master’s (God’s) values. All of us are born into this world that is broken and because we are all shaped and formed in this world we learn certain truths (that are in fact lies) that shape us and our world. Our world or society tells us to seek after money, power, perfection, and success. We have been formed in a world that has told us to be self-reliant and not rely on the help of our community.

This is the sort of thinking that is disrupted when we journey into the heart of God. For when we situate ourselves in God’s heart, we are able to see the world as God’s see it, which includes the discernment to see what master’s we are actually serving. But like the manager in the story I believe that we can change, we can reform and continue to be reformed, we can learn new rules and we can disrupt the ways of this world that do not serve God. Our hope is that as we continue our journey into the heart of God we will become grounded having our feet clearly planted on the ground which means we be able to see the world we live in more clearly. Along with being grounded we hope that we can grow our capacity to hold pain (our own and that of others), and to be kind to ourselves and others.

Our Old Testament reading today from the book of Jeremiah is the exhortation of a prophet weeping and Lamenting:

The prophet states:

*My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?
O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!”*

The Prophet Jeremiah is expressing his grief and lamentation for the people of this world who are hurting and broken by the systems of the world we live in. His work has been calling his people to return to their devotion and covenant with God, but his lament is for the pain and sorrow that this world (and our oppressive systems) bring to his fellow humanity. This lament was written thousands of years ago, but his words still ring true today - there are people around the world who are saying a version of this lament right now. People who are looking for hope.

This portion of scripture is the inspiration and lyrics to the African American Spiritual "There is a Balm in Gilead." Spirituals were songs composed by enslaved Americans who used scripture and song to express both their hope in God and lament about their sorrows. It is not surprising that Jeremiah's lament would find themselves being used by a group of people experiencing the worst kinds of oppression. The spiritual connects the lament of Jeremiah to the hope of salvation in Jesus Christ.

There is a balm in Gilead To make the wounded whole
There is a balm in Gilead To heal the sin-sick soul.....
Sometimes I feel discouraged..... And deep I feel the pain....
In prayers the holy spirit.....Revives my soul again....

As we continue our Journey into the heart of God I believe like the manager in the story we will learn what it means to follow the real Master- God almighty, and from God we will begin to discern a need to connect with our larger community, and part of that connection is being able to see and hold the pain that so many of our brothers and sisters are in. And hopefully like the manager in our story we can also be about the work of bringing justice and restitution and healing...

Amen.

Let us Pray:

Holy God- thank you for your liberating spirit that calls us beyond ourselves and into community with our neighbors... God as we continue on a journey into your heart, guide us on the path that opens our own hearts towards our brothers and sisters who are in pain. God help us to see the world as you see it and help us to only serve you, may we be freed from any other masters who might hold our allegiance. In your name we pray. Amen.

I recently read a memoir Entitled Educated by Tara Westover- that I believe demonstrates this parable in a different sort of way... The memoir is simply Tara's story of her childhood- which to many of us is unrelatable. Tara grew up on a mountain in Idaho "off the grid"- she was the 2nd youngest of an extremely religious family who taught and formed her to believe that the world is scary, and she was to always follow her father's rule. There were many rules that her family had to follow- but two of the most extreme rules were that no one went to school, and no one ever went to the doctor. Throughout Tara's childhood the family experienced several car accidents where different members of her family sustained debilitating injuries and nearly died

as a result. But no one ever went to the hospital- rather they would go home and pray that God would heal the injured family member. Tara was formed in system that told her to always follow her Father's order- he was never to be questioned.

Though Tara's family was isolated- Tara did have one person in her life that was able to whisper through all the fear and preaching... that just maybe life could be different. Tara's grandmother-did not agree with Tara's father and throughout her life her grandmother would help her break the rules (let her eat things her father wouldn't allow) and encourage her to attend school. Her grandmother went to the doctor when she was sick and so Tara lived with the dissonance that someone she loved dearly wasn't living by the rules that her father mandated.

When Tara was a teenager she came to a Critical moment in her life - a cross roads. A Conversion moment. She was driving home from her grandmother's when she came across her brother who had just been in a motorcycle accident. Her brother was unconscious and severely injured. She called home and asked her father what to do. And he told her "bring him home". This was not the first time in Tara's life where a family member was in a critical condition after a car accident, but as Tara began to drive the car with her brother in tow she dissented, she took her brother to hospital. She decided to play the game differently.

Reflecting on this moment Tara writes:

Afterwards, Dad didn't yell or lecture in fact he never mentioned that night again. But there was something in the way he fixed his gaze...never look directly at me that made me think a fork had come along in the road and I'd gone one way and he the other. After that night there was never any question of whether I would go or stay. It was as if we were living in the future, and I was already gone. When I think of that night now, I don't think of the dark highway or my brother lying on the road. I think of the waiting room, sitting across from me is my father and as I look into his worn face it hits me, a truth so powerful I don't know why I've never understood it before. The truth is this: that I am not a good daughter. I am a traitor, a wolf among sheep, there is something different about me. I want to bellow, to weep into my father's knees and promise never to do it again, but wolf that I am, I am still above lying and anyway he would sniff the lie. We both know that if I ever again find Shaun on the highway soaked in crimson I will do exactly what I have just done. I am not sorry.