

23 September 2007
17 Pentecost: The Unjust Steward
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When I looked at today's texts earlier this week, the Gospel reading threw me for a loop. It was not a parable I was familiar with, and I had to read it through a number of times just to figure out what was going on. The basic gist of the story seems to be this: A master accuses his manager of embezzlement and threatens to fire him. The manager is reluctant to make a living by manual labor or to suffer the indignity of begging. So he decides to alter the debts of the master's creditors to get in their good graces. Somehow the master finds out, and can't help but be impressed with the manager's success in getting himself out of the bind.

But so many things about this story don't seem to fall into place. Was the manager guilty of the original charges and trying to find a way to cover his tracks, or was he forced to resort to desperate measures when falsely accused? And what was the outcome – was the master impressed enough to let him keep his job?

Most confusing is the overall message. The one who emerges on top in this story is a trickster who skirts the law to get himself out of a tight spot. I can see the entertainment value of this character, but why is he the exemplar of a parable? Why are the "children of this world" supposed to be models for the "children of the light"? And what does this story have to do with the following caution about the difference between serving God and wealth? If that's the moral of the story, it does not really bear out the parable – the manager seems to be serving himself and his financial situation more than anyone or anything else.

I was so perplexed by this reading that I was tempted just to avoid it altogether and focus on the other texts. But then I realized that this temptation probably made it necessary to engage with it. So I took myself

to Burling Library to seek out more expert knowledge on the subject. It turns out I am not alone in my confusion about this parable of the so-called "Unjust Steward." As one source put it, "the parable is often regarded as the most puzzling of all within the Synoptic Gospels."¹

Apparently the parable's ambiguity has perplexed Biblical scholars for two millennia, and given rise to a number of interpretations. The traditional version is that the manager falsified the debts in order to win the favor of the creditors and put them in his own debt. Others have tried to paint a more sympathetic picture of the steward by assuming that he was merely eliminating the interest or his own commission. Perhaps he was helping others by diminishing their debt. Indeed, the creditors must have benefited from the manager's plan, for the master was unlikely to reinstate the full debts in light of the sudden generosity which would have become attached to his reputation. So the underlying message might be that service to others is the best way to look after one's own needs. But these interpretations hardly explain the master's praise of his manager's shrewdness. The bottom line seems to be that an employee got into trouble, got out of it by doing something dishonest, and was ultimately validated by his employer, who was impressed at his worldly savvy.

The lack of clarity in both the narrative and its message struck me as unusual. The purpose of parables is to convey profound theological concepts through accessible, user-friendly stories. This one is far from user-friendly. Then it occurred to me that even though the story may be unclear to us, maybe it would have made sense to Jesus' immediate audience or to Luke's wider audience. So who were those intended audiences?

Luke's gospel narrative was designed to illustrate the role of Jesus in bringing about God's plan of salvation, and to invite hearers of the story to carry on

¹ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 147.

that work. His intended audience was a friend of some prominence, named Theophilus in the preface, who would presumably use his connections to spread the word about the significance of Jesus' life and work. One of the evangelist's primary intentions was to provide this larger audience with the tools of discipleship: to give them the resources they would need to bear witness to God's purpose and to carry out that work in their own lives. In this passage Luke tells us that Jesus' listeners were primarily disciples. Therefore, both Jesus' listeners and Luke's wider audience should be considered "children of the light": hearers of the word who had accepted the invitation of discipleship, but who would need guidance in meeting its challenges, particularly since in Luke's worldview, the end of time and the culmination of God's plan were immanent.

So how is this crafty steward a model of discipleship? What can "the children of this world" teach "the children of the light"? In effect, Luke tells us that disciples still need to use worldly means in order to shore up their spiritual capital and protect their assets. The master does not commend the manager for his dishonesty per se, but for his cleverness and resourcefulness. Faced with an impossible situation, the manager made use of the resources available to him in order to ensure his future well-being. Granted, the methods he used to ensure that well-being still seem a bit dubious. And while he did help others in need, this seemed to be more of a means to an end than an end in itself. In other words, this wasn't a clear-cut ethical triumph, but the steward did the best he could with what he had.

Which category do we fall into – children of this world, or children of the light? Are we not both? Struggling to be in the world and not of it? The challenge Luke poses here is that in order to ensure our wellbeing in this life and beyond, we have to mobilize the appropriate tools and networks and to exercise some creativity in putting them to use. The result may not be a clear ethical triumph. That doesn't give us free reign to employ whatever means necessary to ensure our own well-being; the manager did not

blatantly abuse others in order to safeguard his interests. But the parable does suggest that discipleship requires some ingenuity and quick thinking from time to time, and might even involve circumventing or reinventing the rules, which are themselves human institutions after all.

In the final analysis, it is probably possible to overthink this parable and the contradictions it poses to Jesus' other teachings. Maybe the story only made sense in the place and time in which it was told. Or maybe there is some truth in another biblical commentary I read that observes:

"The character of the unjust steward...hardly accords with Jesus' demand for self-denial and for unlimited purity and love. Is it too much to say that this tension places in Jesus' message as a whole...an element of comic relief from dead seriousness? Perhaps the more profound theological implication...is that our well-being does not rest ultimately on our dead seriousness."²

Practicality, resourcefulness, care of others, and a bit of comic relief – certainly these can be valuable assets in carrying out the work of discipleship. Of course, when all's said and done, this parable and its message still elude me, leaving me unsatisfied, without a sense of resolution or answers. No doubt you will leave here today with a similar impression of this homily. But I think the point is that in order to be children of the light, we must also be children of this world, a world in which the rules are not always clear and the way is often hazy and unpredictable. Discipleship is messy. Let us embrace the messiness.

Amen.

² Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 162.