

The ingenuity of a shyster

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 2016.

And if you have not been faithful to what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?
Luke 16:12

I have often wondered if some of Jesus' parables were based on actual events to illustrate a point in his teaching. If you are wondering just what he was thinking when he tells this odd story of the unjust manager, you are not the only one. The writer Frederick Buechner wrote that, "Jesus catches us by surprise. He is sometimes cryptic, sometimes irreverent and always provocative."

The shrewd manager in this story is desperate that he is losing his job and is too proud to get his hands dirty in manual labor or to go begging. He works up a scheme to curry favor with his coworkers by reducing the amount of debt they owe to their boss. Everyone benefits from this scheme. The debtors get a break and the clever manager has everyone obligated to him. Even the rich man appears to be benevolent.

To understand this complex parable, it is important to point out that Jesus is not encouraging dishonesty. He is, however, impressed with the man's shrewdness and ingenuity. Jesus always emphasizes eternal values over that which is superficial and temporary. God's expansive love makes possible that the shrewd and dishonest can be redeemed along with those who are honest and faithful. We are all a work in progress and all have opportunity for redemption. Though the manager is being dishonest, he should use his shrewdness for a more honest purpose than taking from the rich to help the poor. The main point here is that because God comes first we cannot serve both God and wealth. There can be no divided loyalties. We can't have it both ways.

The kingdom of God is about our relationship with God that lasts for eternity. It is not about fairness. Nor is it about rewarding good and punishing evil. It's not that simple. God does not keep a ledger on our debts or our debtors. When the time comes for us to give an accounting of ourselves, we will know if we squandered what we had on ourselves or used it for better purpose. The kingdom of God is about reconciliation. It is about forgiveness of debts and debtors. From a purely human standpoint, it doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense to forgive those who offend us. It doesn't make sense to be kind to mean spirited people. Doing the right thing doesn't have to make sense, nor does it have to be logical.

I don't like to be suspicious of people, but experience has taught me to be wary of scam artists. It makes it doubly hard when we are supposed to trust people. Scammers see the church as easy prey but we have learned not to suffer fools gladly. I like to give people the benefit of the doubt until I suspect a clever scheme designed to take advantage of our good will. While this parable illustrates the need to beware of scam artists and their dishonest schemes, Jesus makes the point that clever and creative imagination can be put to better use to serve God's purposes. If we can be trusted in lesser things, we can also be trusted in greater matters.

This parable also tells us that we can't get by with just obeying the rules. We can't get off for good behavior. We need to be shrewd and quick thinking not for what we can do for ourselves, but for what we can do for God. We need to be willing to take the risk of getting into trouble in order to accomplish a greater good.

God's grace comes to those we think don't deserve it. We have to be careful not to stereotype the homeless and those who live below the poverty line by assuming that they are all lazy and shiftless. Most homeless people do not in their right mind choose to live that way. If we were as wise and shrewd in our generosity toward the poor, there would be far fewer in need of help. If Jesus were concerned about respectability he wouldn't have angered the Pharisees and Sadducees by associating with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. He wouldn't have welcomed outcasts, embraced the lepers or elevated the status of women. If he were only concerned about respectability, he would not have allowed himself to suffer a gruesome death on the cross.

When using our talents and resources in making a living, how much we earn is not as important as how we use what we have. It follows that when we are faithful in lesser things we can be trusted in greater things. That is why trust and fidelity is just as essential in our working life as it is in marriage and family. When and where honesty is the norm, dishonesty becomes the exception and when we are shrewd in maintaining our integrity, we can be trusted in greater things.

While we may admire the craftiness of the manager in this story, let us not overlook the fact that what he did was still dishonest. Don't be fooled by those who rationalize that the tax system encourages dishonesty and that it doesn't pay to be honest. The irony is that some very dishonest people sleep soundly while those who try to lead honest lives lie awake trying to figure out how to make ends meet. In the final analysis, it is still wrong to lie, to cheat or steal, it is still wrong to misrepresent yourself, it is still wrong to be dishonest even in small ways. Little white lies have a way of growing into big bold ones. We may try to fool ourselves and may even succeed in fooling others, but we can't fool God. If you are confronted with having to choose between the lesser of two evils, remember that the lesser of two evils is still evil. It is better to be imaginative and clever in striving to do the right thing than to give in to deceit and corruption.

Though Jesus had little or nothing of his own, he saw how easily money and possessions can determine how we live. As stewards and managers of all God's gifts, we have the responsibility to use what we have wisely. Whatever we accumulate in the way of wealth and possessions, it is our character and reputation that is at stake in this life and the life to come.