

The Dishonest Manager

“Help us, O Lord, to know that we dwell in you and you dwell in us this day and forevermore.”

Amen

As some of you may know, I write murder mysteries, more for fun than profit, and a number of years ago, I attended a mystery writer’s workshop where half a dozen authors spent the day talking about various aspects of writing in general and mystery writing in particular. The talks covered a wide range of topics from what it was like to be a best selling author — not something that’s relevant to me — to describing the gruesome details of how a real crime scene investigation is done as opposed to the TV version. There were two talks that I found especially interesting, though. The first talk discussed the idea of a plot twist, where something unexpected is introduced that turns the story on its head so all our assumptions are swept away and we’re left with a nugget of understanding that reveals a new, story-changing truth. The second talk was about the idea that the protagonist should be struggling with some personal crisis at the same time that he or she is solving the mystery, and that the resolution of the two things bring about change and growth.

Today’s parable reminds me of that workshop, even though the Gospel reading is more like a novel than a murder mystery. First, we have a wealthy landowner who’s being cheated by his manager, so naturally the landowner fires him. Next, comes a nice bit of internal dialog that lays out the crooked manager’s dilemma: his reputation is trashed; nobody is going to trust him anymore, not even as a first-century equivalent of dog catcher. He’s no good at digging ditches, so what’s a hardworking crook to do? At this point, the manager has an epiphany - he needs friends. Friends who will take him in and help him get back on his feet. But how does one make friends on short notice, especially when his job has been to collect rents from the local farmers - which probably didn’t make him very popular? As we’d expect, he does what he knows best and swindles the landowner again, only this time he brings in the farmers as accomplices by having them write new, phony bills, which

presumably boosts is popularity. Plus, having them write the phony bills creates the potential for a little blackmail on the side, if worse comes to worse. I have to admit the blackmail angle came from one of the commentaries, or I'd have missed it entirely.

This guy is no dummy; he knows how to work all the angles.

Now, we'd expect the landowner to be pretty angry when he finds out about this latest scam — but no, here comes the plot twist. The landowner praises his crooked manager for being so creative and shrewd; he's probably still fired, but at least the landowner appreciates the initiative. If only the manager had put that shrewdness and energy to good ends...

I really like this reading; it does such a nice job of showing the deviousness of human nature, and the possibility of forgiveness. One could turn it into a great mystery.

So what do we make of this story, this moral mystery? Some of you may be sitting there waiting for a Hercule Poirot moment, something akin to my explaining how the butler killed the duke with a candlestick in the drawing room. I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed, though, because I think this is one of those-solve-it-yourself mysteries where the story is still unfolding and each of us has our own piece of the puzzle.

Personally, when I read this passage, I got hung up over the idea of “buying” the farmers' friendship by embroiling them in this bit of fraud, essentially saying, “here's a bunch of money, now be my friend, and if you don't I can use your phony bills to blackmail you.” I have trouble thinking of that as the start of a healthy relationship. And yet in the next verse, Jesus, the true master of plot twists, tells us that it's a good thing to make friends by means of “dishonest wealth.” After all, as the manager is discovering, what's more important, money, which doesn't last long anyway, or friendship, which does?

A lot of stewardship sermons have been preached around these readings, but I'm going to leave those to your imagination for now, because at the moment I'm more interested the relationship side of this story.

Samuel Cox, the nineteenth century Baptist minister and writer had this to say about today's parable: “If we were to wait for perfect men, men perfect in all

parts and on all sides of their character, before admiring them or asking others to admire them, whom should we admire? What models or examples could we hold up before our children or our neighbors?"

I think today's slash and burn political campaign illustrates Cox's point. We hear so many negative things on the campaign trail like, "Don't vote for him or her because he or she will destroy the country, or is a crook, or a bigot, or a liar, or just plain crazy. Forget the good things my opponent may have done and focus entirely on the bad." I complain about negativity in politics, yet all too often it creeps, unnoticed, into my thinking. And yet until I take the time to look at my neighbor's good side as well as the bad side, and accept them both, I don't really know that person and can't have a real relationship.

Years ago, I volunteered for a while at the St. Mark's food bank in Augusta. One day as I was unpacking boxes and helping to stock the shelves, one of the other helpers came in, outraged because she'd just seen one of their clients driving off with three bags of food in the trunk of a new Lincoln Continental. Her tirade went on for quite a while as she complained about the lax application process, the need for verification, and how the food was being stolen from more needy people. Finally one of the old-timers pointed out that she was being critical without knowing the whole story. Perhaps the client didn't own a car and was borrowing it from a friend. The discussion went on from there but in the end it boiled down to the understanding that there was no way to prevent all forms of dishonesty; we had to accept it and not dwell on the injustice, trusting in God to deal with it, which was His job, not ours. Without that trust in God, there was no way we could help the needy in a truly caring way, and that, after all, was what we, as people of faith, are all about. We minister to an imperfect world. God is in charge of perfection.

Emily and I bought a new-used car Wednesday. We've been looking through the ads for months, but most of the possibilities weren't quite right, or were too expensive, or the time wasn't convenient, or it was too far away. After all, who wants to take the trouble of driving 200 hundred miles to look at car that may not be right?

We happened to be going through Union on Wednesday, as we usually

do, and there, parked on the grass at the main intersection, was a car with “For Sale” signs plastered on every window. It wasn’t quite what we wanted, but it was close enough for us to stop and take a look. It wasn’t perfect, but the good outweighed the bad, and the rest is history. I wonder now if that car with all its For Sale signs wasn’t God’s playful way of saying, “For heaven’s sake what does it take to get your attention? Stop dithering and do something about a car.” There’s no such thing as perfection in cars, or in people. Everything is a balance of good and bad, and we only cheat ourselves by not accepting God’s gifts as they are.

So, what about the parable? Where will the manager, the flawed hero of this story, end up? It seems to me that he’s a work in progress. He’s come to recognize the need for friends, even if it’s only for selfish reasons at first. At least he plants the seed of friendship (so to speak) with the farmers . What remains to be seen, the next chapter in this novel, is whether he nurtures that seed. Will the landowner’s plot-twisting display of tolerance and praise cause the manager to think differently? Does the manager get the message? Will he end up discovering that a relationship is an end in itself, bringing its own rewards that go far beyond what money can buy? Will he spend the time and effort that it takes to build deeper relationships with others?

Ultimately, in the final chapter, it seems to me that the manager has two choices: He can think of friendship in terms of money, and end up like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, using people, and ultimately living a life of disappointment, isolation, and friendlessness; or he can follow the landowner’s example and think of friendship as an end in itself, tolerant of his neighbor’s faults, while seeking out his neighbor’s gifts - praising them and rejoicing in them.

I’d like to close with a prayer by Thomas Merton:

O God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept you, and we thank you, and we adore you, and we love you with our whole being, because our being is your being, our spirit is rooted in your spirit.

Amen

