

“Expanding Borders”

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Luke 16:1-8

CHILDREN’S TIME

Sometimes when we are in church we get hungry, so I brought some snacks. Is anyone hungry for ... doggie treats? Eww, pretty gross! Smell these. Not very good, eh?

I bet you would much rather have a cheese stick, or fruit, right?

You know who loves these treats? My dog Skyler. Do you have dogs? I bet they love treats too. Skyler will do just about anything for a treat. She will sit, lay down, roll over, walk around me, shake hands. If she knows she’ll get a treat, she will do whatever you ask.

But you know what? When a dog does something for a treat, they do it for selfish reasons, don't they? When you train a dog, the dog does tricks because they want a reward. If you weren't waving one of these yummy treats in front of them, they might just ignore you.

Maybe we respond to God that way sometimes. We act nice and even pray because we want God to give us something we want?

But God doesn't want us to do things only to get a reward. Whether we have a good day or a bad one, we can still praise God, and thank God for all the things God has given us.

There is a story in the Bible about a man named Job who showed this kind of love. Job lost every good thing he had, but he refused to walk away from God. Job knew that everything he had was already a gift from God, so he continued to praise God.

When good things happen, we can rejoice and thank God. But let's not forget to thank God in the bad times too, because no matter how bad things are, God is still good.

SERMON

This week we have a troubling parable. Many pastors avoid it like the plague. It is troubling because on the surface Jesus tells a story of a person who cheats his master to get ahead and is known to be a thief and liar, but is praised by his master.

READ LUKE 16:1-8

One might ask, how did this story find its way into the bible?

One commentator named Julian, in the fourth century went so far as to say that this parable reinforced the idea that Jesus encouraged his followers to be liars and thieves. Therefore the Romans who were noble should reject the corrupting influence of Christians.

I want to spend some time today digging into this often confusing parable of Jesus. But first of all we have to address what a parable isn't and what it is.

Parables first of all are not simply moral teachings, in this case, about money. Parables do so much more.

Parables are stories designed to challenge and subvert the status quo. They get past the head and into the heart. They catch you off guard.

Parables are multi-faceted, like a piece of art that is set in the center of a room in a museum. You look at it and see something, and then the more you walk around it and observe it from different angles the more you see. Then when the light changes you see more. It impacts you in such a way that you go home and then come back to see it again and find more dimensions that you didn't see the first time.

Parables are like that.

Parables are also set within a certain tradition and culture using references from that culture. So, look at this parable with an appreciation of a Middle Eastern perspective from Jesus' day.

There are three key players in this parable: the steward (or slave), the master, and the master's community of friends.

The steward was a manager overseeing at least a portion of the business dealings of a large agricultural operation. The steward is a slave of the rich owner, called the "master" in the story.

In the story, there are rumblings among the master's friends that this steward is not conducting himself responsibly in his role and that he is not to be trusted. These reports obviously come from trusted sources such that the master feels no need to investigate any further. He is confident that he has a handle on the facts.

Once the master learns of the dishonest steward, he calls him in and asks "What is this I hear about you?" This is a classic opening line for this kind of confrontation in the Middle East, even to this day, but it isn't really a question he is asking.

Instead, he is essentially firing him on the spot, which is evident by the

next line which says “give me an accounting of your management.” In the Greek it is pretty clear that he is asking him to turn over his accounting books because at that moment he is done, fired.

So, anything more he does related to his former position is illegal and not binding, because he no longer speaks for the master.

This is not a typical firing. More often when firing someone in the Middle East, there would be at least several days of negotiation with arguments being made back and forth. These could be related to family relationships in the business. For example...

“My father worked for your father, and my grandfather for your grandfather. Are you sure you want to break this wonderful family history of trust?”

The steward could also protest or argue the validity of the accusation against him, demanding that the people who accused him come before him to state their case against his professed innocence.

He could have employed a number of tactics like this, but he doesn't.

Instead, he doesn't even respond, but remains silent. This is striking and a direct admission of guilt. He

realizes that he has no leg to stand on related to his dishonest business dealings. He is also acknowledging that he would not be able to get anywhere with this master if he were to argue his case.

Kenneth Bailey is a theologian who lived for 30 years in the Middle East. He said that he observed and questioned Middle Easterners in positions of authority over the course of decades of time. He never knew of one instance when firing an individual when they did not argue to be reinstated. Even if they were guilty as ever. This is expected in Middle Eastern culture.

So, the steward leaves and considers his options for his future.

Literally, all options will be closed to him once word about his firing and dishonesty get out. He will be blacklisted as dishonest and nobody will want anything to do with him.

Now the high road and appropriate thing to do would be to come clean, stop stealing, repent, and change his ways. We can hear Jesus telling such a man “Go, and sin no more.” But remember, this isn't a moral lesson that Jesus is telling.

The steward doesn't do this. In fact, he acts shrewdly, doubling

down on his thievery and chooses to steal even more in one grand, final, last ditch effort to create an unconventional opportunity for himself.

He chooses this path because he already knows the master to be a generous man, and he trusts he will continue to be so.

The story also says that he acts so that he might be welcome into someone else's house. Essentially, he wants to create an open door so that he can get a job managing another master's estate.

So, he devises a plan. Remember, every bit of his plan is illegal because he has already been fired. However, the rest of the master's staff and his debtors are not yet aware of this fact because he was fired in private. So, he needs to work fast.

He goes right into the account book that is still in his possession, looks up the people who owe his former master money, invites them to meet him individually in private, and eliminates a good portion of their debt.

The amounts that are forgiven are tremendous. Fifty jugs of oil would be worth about 500 denarii, or equal to the wages of a farm hand for about a year and a half. The

second debtor mentioned is forgiven about the same amount even though the percentages are different.

Of course all of the debtors are now singing the praises not only of this former slave because he brought them good news, but of the master.

The master quickly develops a wonderful reputation as the most generous person the town has ever known. He was already known to be generous, but wow!

He becomes the "man of the hour." People may want to nominate him for mayor, or give him the keys to the city. Almost immediately, he becomes everyone's favorite person and the biggest celebrity.

Now, this puts the master in a very difficult position. Once he discovers what this former slave has done, he realizes that he can't hardly go to all of these debtors who are praising him for his generosity and tell them, "No, sorry, you'll still owe the whole amount. This yahoo, former slave of mine made a mistake." Imagine the backlash!

So, considering his options, the master will eat the financial loss, in essence paying for the salvation of the former slave, and in the

process keep the reputation as a generous master.

The master then praises the dishonest steward for his shrewd negotiating. He is praised not for his dishonesty, but for his cleverness, his shrewdness.

There is a bit of commentary at the end of the parable saying that the “people of the world” are much more shrewd than the “people of light.”

The twist is that this is meant not as a compliment to the community of faith, but a dig, a challenge. Jesus wants them to be more shrewd, like the people of the world.

Verses 8-9 in The Message translation can give us another way to see it. Eugene Peterson puts it this way...

“Now here’s a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way — but for what is right — using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the

bare essentials, so you’ll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.”

This is the shocking and subversive part of this parable that probably had Jesus’ disciples scratching their heads and talking for weeks.

Being shrewd most often carries with it a negative flavor. It has been associated with cheating, conniving, manipulation and the like. Snakes have been associated with shrewdness for this reason.

Another dimension of shrewdness includes: cleverness, being streetwise as part of a counter culture. Being shrewd affords one the ability to see beyond the boundaries and norms that are typical and traditional within a particular culture, and envision possibilities that are unconventional which often buck the system and the status quo.

With this parable, Jesus was imploring his followers to be creative outside the limits of the traditional way of life. They must think out of the box, beyond the traditional religious framework. For that was where Jesus lived and that was where God’s kingdom was being established and built.

They needed to be a bit more shrewd both in order to see the

ways of the kingdom, and then to live there with Jesus.

Perhaps part of following Jesus is living outside the box of the traditional forms of religion — you know the ones, the things that keep us feeling comfortable and good about ourselves in the church without any urgency. We go to church on Sunday to feel good about ourselves and then go home without a felt need to do anything new or different.

There's a word for this: "complacency."

Instead of relying on the conventions of the Christian faith, perhaps we need to give them up and risk by engaging on a different level with each other and the world around us.

"Let's blow it up" is a phrase I heard here last year when we were creating a new organization structure for the church. That is very much in line with what we can hear in this parable.

Don't simply play it safe.

One way to do this is to be wise about letting go of things that no longer serve us — stripping away the things that prevent us from moving forward and growing as a congregation.

It can be helpful to have the shrewd qualities when we look outside the box and get creative about how we live as God's new kingdom in this world.

This is about being shrewd in how we expand the borders of our faith to include things and people normally not part of a "church experience."

Sure let's blow it up! What might this look like here in Birmingham?

But remember, this is risky. This is challenging. This is the way of God's kingdom on earth!