

The Steward Who Used His Head

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Sermon for September 20, 1998

Lessons Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20) - Year C

Amos 8:4-7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

If you're a regular here, you're probably aware of a certain running gag between Anita and myself whenever we have to preach when Pastor Paul's away. However, for the benefit of those of you who don't know the gag, I'll bring you up to date.

Basically, when it's time to pick a weekend to preach, I look at the assigned lessons first, and pick my preaching assignments based on what I think I can do with those lessons. Anita, on the other hand, is a little braver than I, picking her preaching assignments solely by the date. So far she claims to have been burned twice and is now considering using my technique, and ironically the two she thought were hard would've been easy ones for me.

Well, there's a third technique for picking preaching assignments that we haven't mentioned. It's the "you're the head deacon, everyone else has picked their weekends, and this is what's left" method. And that's how it came to pass that I got to preach on a bunch of lessons that many *pastors* have a hard time with. One tends to wonder if Pastor Paul knew these lessons were coming up when he planned to be away this weekend.

Now, to be fair, most people would have absolutely no problem preaching on the Old Testament lesson from Amos, about the rich cheating the poor, and most listeners would have no problem understanding it.

Similarly, most people would have no problem preaching on the New Testament lesson from Timothy, and most listeners would have no problem understanding it...especially since the bit about praying for leaders in government seems to be a hot topic lately.

The toughie. The one that people have a hard time preaching on and understanding...and, of course, the one I'm going to preach on...is the Gospel lesson from Luke. The one *commonly known* as the parable of the dishonest steward.

Did you notice the emphasis I put on the words "commonly known as?" Sort of like "the alleged offender," or "the accused assailant." Each of those phrases implies that things may not be all they seem. Especially when you look at it almost 2000 years later from the vantage point of a different language and culture.

The problem many people have with this lesson is that they see this steward who's

being fired for mishandling the master's finances, and then both the master in the story and Jesus, who is telling the story go and praise this guy for the way he handles things when he realizes he's about to be out of a job. We can't believe that Jesus is actually praising this guy for "cooking the books" and using him as an example of how we should be. There must be something terribly wrong here.

And there is. What's wrong is the understanding many of us have of this story and what it's saying. Let's look carefully at it for a minute. First of all, most translations say something along the lines of "the steward was accused of wasting his master's goods." Any lawyers in the house? Any teenagers in the house? What's the key word in this? **Accused**. It doesn't say that he was actually guilty of, it said that he was accused, and perhaps unjustly, of not doing his job well. And when you look at it that way, the picture changes a little bit. You might figure that if the guy's being fired unjustly, it makes sense for the him to create his own little severance package with the boss's goods. And yet there's still the problem of the boss and Jesus praising him for doing this.

Well, let's add something else to the equation here. Did the steward stick it to the boss when he started giving everyone deep discounts, or was he taking it out of **his own commission as steward**? The answer to this question could change everything. If we go with our common understanding that he was sticking it to the boss, we still have a problem. But if we say that he was taking it out of his own commission, we can say that our friend here was acting wisely, sacrificing short term

gain for long term security. That would be nice. That would be neat. That would take away all the moral problems that this story presents. And...there's a 50% chance that this interpretation is wrong. So as much as we'd like to deal with the nice, neat, clean version, let's take a look at the old seedy version that we're familiar with, to see what it has to tell us.

What exactly is it that both the master and Jesus are praising? Are they praising what we might see as the steward's dishonesty? No. What they **are** praising is this guy's ability to think on his feet, his shrewdness, the fact that he knew how to make the best of a bad situation.

One can see where these actions might be proof to the master that the accusations were false and that this guy really was someone he wanted to keep around as a steward. But why was Jesus praise this?

The answer comes from a conversation I had with Cheryl a few weeks ago.

I forget what brought it up. Maybe it was a letter in **Christianity Today** or **The Lutheran** lamenting the old news that evil people flourish while the righteous are cut down like grass. If it wasn't a letter or article in one of those magazines, it was something pretty similar...the old complaint that "the system" doesn't work the way we think it should. The good should be rewarded while the evil suffer, and not what seems to be the other way around. We want a nice simple equation we can understand and deal with, and right now the results aren't fitting our expectations.

And this is because we're stubbornly using the wrong equation to try to solve the problem. Last year Marilyn VosSavant ran a

problem in her column about the chances of two different families having different distributions of boys and girls. When she showed the correct answer and how it was worked out, the mail started coming in from both supporters and detractors, and it went on for months. It got particularly ugly when a person from risk management at a nuclear power plant wrote in to agree with Marilyn's answer and her method, and someone wrote back later on saying that they were going to send that person's name into the Nuclear Regulatory Commission as someone who had no business determining risk at power plants, because their obviously poor math skills posed a threat to the rest of us.

What was going on here was that the people who disagreed with Marilyn and the power plant person were people with basic math skills who weren't getting the fact that this was a **probability and statistics** problem, that these problems need a whole different set of equations than most things we're used to dealing with, and that while the answers may seem intuitively wrong, when you check them out against real world examples, they're dead on. These were people who were stubbornly using the wrong equation to solve the problem.

And so it is with us and the way the world works. There *is* an equation that explains who gets what in this world. It's also a very **simple** equation. But it's one that a lot of us aren't going to like. You see, it's not based on whether or not you're good, but instead on whether or not you're **smart**.

Look around and you'll see that except for those who have been particularly lucky, those who have met with success, whether evil or good, have by and large also been

smart. Similarly, once again making exception for those who have been particularly **unlucky**, you'll see that for the most part those who have not met with success, whether good or evil, have not been so smart.

It is the being smart which both Jesus and steward's master praise. It is being smart in knowing how the world works that is the point here. And Jesus notes that it is this knowledge and understanding of how the world works that many of the children of light are lacking.

And the sad fact is that there are way too many naive Christians out there. There are too many of us who believe that faith in God is a substitute for acting wisely. Too many of us who don't think before we act, and expect God to protect us from the results of not thinking things through. Too many of us who have traded in using our God-given brains not for the child-like faith that Jesus says we should have, but for a **childish** faith that expects all to go well for us because we are God's. Jesus praises the steward in the parable not for acting dishonestly, but for the smarts that those actions showed.

A few years ago the big news here was about how The Rescue Mission, along with many other Christian schools and organizations got taken in by a pyramid scam from the New Era Foundation. As I read more and more about this scam, it became apparent how much of its ability to succeed was based on the simple naiveté of the Christian organizations that were taken in by it. When approached by New Era's people about investing in the fund, no one thought about doing a little background

check because there was a long list of other Christian organizations that had already signed up and done well. Surely these organizations wouldn't have signed up if there was any sign of fraud. And in fact, when a financial person at one of the schools involved suggested doing a little checking around, he was told not to bother for those exact reasons. It was only after he, at great risk to his own job, decided to check things out anyway, that he found out enough to alert the Federal authorities that something seemed amiss...which indeed it was.

I suspect that a dishonest person, being familiar with the aroma, would've smelled a rat a lot sooner. Even a relatively honest, but slightly more "worldly" person would've thought that this deal sounded too good to be true, and done a little investigation into it. But the pattern was that Christian institution after Christian institution, after hearing about this plan to double their money in a short amount of time through this "Christian" investment scheme, fell for it hook, line, and sinker because of their naive faith and lack of street smarts...a combination which New Era's backers knew to look for because it is all too common among us.

Jesus seems to be saying here that your faith in him doesn't require having to check your brain at the door. I know this is good news to me, because I've seen far too many churches that seem to require just that. I like the brain God gave me, and I want to be able to use it. And I'll admit that I may be reading too much into it by suggesting that it also means that faith in him is not a substitute for using the brains God gave

you in the first place. It is perhaps even possible to misplace your faith in God if you use it as an excuse to not do the hard work yourself.

One of my favorite stories about misplaced faith and not using a little common sense involves a man who was caught in a flood. And as he stood on his front porch watching the waters rise, a woman came by in a boat and offered him a ride to safety.

"Oh no," our friend said. "I have faith in God. He'll save me." And so the boat rowed away.

A little later, standing in his second floor window, our friend saw another boat come by with another offer of a ride to safety.

Again, our friend said, "Oh no. I have faith in God. He'll save me."

And so a little later we find our friend standing on his roof when a helicopter comes by and drops him a ladder. And again our friend says, "Oh no. I have faith in God. He'll save me."

Well, shortly after that the waters rose beyond our friend's ability to stay above them and he drowned. As he stood at the gates of Heaven, St Peter could see that the guy was quite upset, so he asked what the problem was, and our friend said, "I had faith that God would save me, and he let me drown anyway."

To this, St Peter, exasperated, said, "Well good grief man. He sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?"

What is it about our faith in God that makes some of us so stupid? What is it about our faith in God that makes some of us think that it's all up to him and we don't have to do anything ourselves anymore? And

what kind of witness to the rest of the world is this?

Jesus expects us to use our brains. He expects us to ask questions. He expects us to check things out. He expects us to be able to think on our feet and make the best of a bad situation like the steward in the parable did.

Jesus says that you can be his follower and use your brain. This is good news to me and should be to you too. It tells you that you're expected to question to make sure

that you're following *him* and not charlatan preying on "standard Christian weaknesses." Not only that, but you are expected to use your brain to help yourself and others, and to be a witness to him by doing so, because I'm telling you, the last thing we need is more stupid Christians.

God gave you brains. Use them to his glory. Amen.