

“The Parable of the Unexpected Audit”

Luke 16: 1-9

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Commitment Sunday

Does this parable leave you feeling a bit strange? Where this dishonest manager, who ends up giving away his boss's money, in the end, is lifted up as a hero? In fact, the owner ends up praising him?

This Parable has embarrassed Presbyterians for centuries. It reminds me of a friend in college who lived on a perpetual moral holiday. This parable even embarrassed the Gospel writer, Luke. He records this radical parable as Jesus gave it, but then, to try to make it fit a somewhat more conventional morality Luke tacks on 3 different endings!

To make sure we get the message, it's good to take a little time and remember what a parable does. A parable is no cute, quick little moral of the end of a story. No tin foil happy thought wrapped around a Dove chocolate.

A parable is a remarkable phenomenon, built on paradox, delivering deliberate shock effect. My favorite New Yorker cartoon is presented in 3 panels. The First panel: A man laying underneath a palm tree.

He is awake, but the thought bubble over his head is completely blank. Second panel: A coconut falls from the palm tree and conks him on the head. The last panel, the same beach, same tree, same man, but now the thought bubble is full of raving squiggles that show he's thinking now!

That's what a parable does: It's the conk on the head that jolts us into thought. A parable comes crashing down on our head we become conscious in a new way.

Jesus does not just tell parables. Jesus is a parable. Jesus is the paradox, the shock effect of God. A central focus of a parable is always on a scandal that stands the world on its ear. It breaks through our conventional understanding of the world with a shock that makes the listener begin to think anew. Parables have the provocative power to disclose dramatically different possibilities for living.

So it is with the Parable of the unexpected audit. A man is managing someone's property. The rumor comes to the owner: this guy is squandering your property. When confronted with his looming unemployment, we expect the manager to do one of two things. Either, wring blood out of a turnip, and get these deadbeats to pay up! Or... stuff some cash into a suitcase and head for the border.

And we expect for the owner, the boss to say: You're fired!

To purge the uncleanness. Then hire someone in there who knows about business. Someone who has his Harvard MBA. Who has a spotless track record? Someone who has a stable personal life, no arrests, no DUI's, Rotary person of the year. Someone like us, you know, who is perfect.

We have this tendency toward perfectionism. We see ourselves as perfect in all these habits: Athletic purity: run 10 miles a day. No screen time, we only read books recommended by the New York Review of Literature. We judge our food like our chicken. We want our chicken to be non-fat, non-calorie, fed non-GMO grains, pesticide free, stress-free, with therapeutically happy childhoods roaming around the farm.

Our expectation of everything about ourselves: to be perfect.

The problem is this striving toward perfectionism gives us some cognitive dissonance: we cannot meet our own expectations. We even end up deluded that we can be perfect. The problem is, it becomes a form of idolatry. Pride. Perfectionism.

This parable shatters that whole way of thinking. This manager is not pure, he's something of a crook. Let's say it again, he's something of a crook, with the implication, just like us.

Robert Penn Warren in novel, "All the King's Men" writes of a corrupt politician, Willie Stark. Willie says:

"Just plain, simple goodness. You can't inherit that from anybody.

You got to make it out of badness. Badness. You know why?" he asks.

"Because," he says, "there isn't anything else."

(All the King's Men, New York, Bantam Press. 1959. p. 257)

Willie Stark sounds very Presbyterian. We are people on the make. We define ourselves by our doing. We assess one another on our accomplishments. We are all about our perfect lives, including making money, accumulating cash... profits, wealth.

But the audit of our lives shows we could have done more. We should have done more. We could have been more.

The "Parable of the Unexpected Audit" shows the manager to be an outstanding procrastinator. Did you see? He has to ask the debtors how much they owe. He doesn't even know! Procrastination is like a credit card: It is a lot of fun until you get the bill.

But life has requirements. Life has responsibilities. And there comes a time when we are surprised by the unexpected audit. Which is a not-very-veiled way of talking about death. The judgement days come, this unexpected audit of our lives, and it's not going to be pretty for any of us.

But then comes Jesus' parable. There is another possibility. We can re-write the story of our lives. We can give our lives a paradigm shift now that will make all the difference. It's a change that goes like this:

Yes, we are still going to deal with money. Wealth. Power. That's the world as it is. But stop worrying about making money. Stop worrying about being perfect. And start worrying about making friends. "Make friends for yourselves by means of your unclean wealth," Jesus says. The manager does not stop participating in the economic system. He starts using his wealth for larger purposes.

What was it this crooked manager did? He took these people who were perennially in debt and restored them. He gave them a chance. He showed them grace. He built a relationship. He had compassion. He replaced judgmentalism with grace.

The dishonest manager got dirty hands but the people around him had a clean slate. His job is coming to an end but the people around him had a new beginning.

What was the Virtue Jesus lifted up? Being shrewd. Shrewd about what really matters in life. The manager used to feel all alone, but he replaced that solo existence with a life connected to his community. Make friends for yourselves by the wealth you have in this life. Give people hope, and you will get hope yourselves. Stop worrying about making money, start focusing on making friends with people in need.

It's like that warning that comes with every stock offering: "Past performance does not guarantee future results; your rate of return may vary." Your rate of friendship response may vary. Make friends anyway. You never know when that audit is coming. Make friends now.

John Kennedy used to talk about running around the neighborhood when they were kids. Climbing over fences and walls. He said when they came to a wall that was really high, they would challenge one another, and they would challenge themselves to make sure they climbed that wall with one simple ritual. Each boy would take their hat off and throw it over the wall! That's one way to make sure you met the challenge.

Our Presbyterian version of throwing your hat over the wall is called a pledge card. You tossed your hat over the wall this morning. It was impressive. What walls will we, the people of House of Hope, climb together this year?

You are letting God know where you are headed this next year with your pledge. It does not have to be perfect. But it is about building up the community of this church, making friends in our ministry with one another, in our community in Christ, and our outreach to the world.

Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." It is the freedom to serve that he is talking about. The freedom to express the passion of love that you have for the community around you as we have been set free by the love God has for us.

The Parable of the Unexpected Audit gives us the challenge: Get a new bottom line with your life. Re-write the story of your life:

It is no longer about who you beat out,
but who you built up.
Not about who you showed up,
but who you lifted up.
Not how perfect you were,
but how giving you are.
Not whose debt you collected,
but whose debt you forgave.

Your motives do not have to be pure, and, come to think of it, you do not have to be pure. Notice: the boss in this story still receives at least 50 cents on the dollar, which in the case of some bad investments, is still better than nothing.

So in terms of love, it's not sloppy agape. But it does have a clear focus on friendship. The bottom line question: Did you show some grace?

Make friends for yourself by means of your imperfect money. The manager is a crook, he's lazy, he's a cheat, but at least he is relating to his neighbors with a generous friendship. Building up a community of people who have experienced grace. To paraphrase Jesus, would that the children of light were as dedicated as that.

Stop obsessing about showing off how perfect everything in your life is. Start making friends. Start building community. We are the managers of this life that God has entrusted to us. Use your resources to create community. Spend your lives taking the pressure off of other people. You have been set as manager over God's asset of love: Spend the love you have. Spend yourself.

In this parable, God is the boss. We are the dishonest manager. In this parable, at the beginning, there was a problem between the boss and the manager.

In the end, there is not. God cares about the grace. God wants us to use what is entrusted to us to build up an alternative reality. Spend our lives spending our love.

This parable reveals, that when our unexpected audit comes, we may end up being delightfully surprised.

Sources:

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