



16 PENTECOST (PROPER 20)

25 Ordinary

19 September 2004

Amos 8:4-7

Psalm 113

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

The parable about the dishonest manager that we hear from St. Luke this morning is one that has left many people scratching their heads for a goodly portion of the last 2,000 years. How can Jesus tell a parable in which someone who is dishonest seems to be the good-guy, a parable in which Jesus himself seems to commend the action of the unjust manager who cheats the one who employs him? It is evident to textual scholars that the earliest editors of Luke's Gospel were also more than a little confused themselves about this parable, and so they tacked onto the end of it a series of very un-promise-like platitudes that make little to no sense in the context of this section of Luke—which contains the best-known parables of radical grace. This parable of the unjust and dishonest manager is so . . . so extremely odd and enigmatic that many biblical believe these words are as close or closer to being authentic, verbatim words of Jesus; who else but the man from Nazareth could come up with something this strange and this outrageous?

How to unravel this mess? First, this is a parable—not an allegory. As you might remember from High School English, in an allegory each person, place, or thing in the story logically and neatly stands for something in daily life. Parables, by contrast, are much less tidy. In figuring out what a parable means, we look for one or two main points, and we don't get too bogged down if there isn't complete logical consistency between each aspect of the parable and that to which it points. Indeed, one of the reasons that many have gotten themselves twisted in knots over the parable of the dishonest, unjust manager is the very quest for an equation-like. The second move in unraveling this morning's parable—a move important to unraveling any scripture—is to see how it speaks forth the promise. This parable from Luke's Gospel is preceded by three of the most radical parables of grace one can image. First are the two parables from last week's reading—parables that tell us that God's completely undeserved gifts of love and forgiveness are, in human terms, completely outrageous—if not just downright crazy. The third of these parables, one we hear in Lent, is about a father who disregards, overlooks his son's wasteful and wanton life-style—who goes out to look for his loser son, who welcomes the big loser home, and throws a great feast in his honor. The parable is a total affront to those who have been dutiful daughters and sons, and the loser's over achieving older brother cries out, "No fair!!" God, of course, is the father whose love qualifies him for insanity—and all human beings, no matter how sinful, depraved, defiant, or self-righteous, are the ones welcomed by God into God's house—and without condition. And now this strange parable about the dishonest manager. I would wager that the parable of the dishonest steward is of a piece with these three parables of radical and outrageous grace.

Some of you have heard me tell—more than once, or twice, or maybe three times—about asking the 8th graders in my confirmation class in St. Peter, Minnesota if they wanted God to be fair. Oh yes, most definitely they all replied – all of them except one young man sitting off in a corner by himself—the class outcast. Unlike the rest of the kids who were from well-to-do homes, he lived in a trailer park. His clothes were ratty. He was dark and swarthy, with greasy hair, he already had to shave, and he usually smelled of cigarettes. "Jamie," I said, "you don't want God to be fair. Why not?" "Because," he answered quietly, "if God

is going to be fair, I'm cooked." Jamie was not far from the reign of God. If we desire God to be just and fair, we too are cooked.

Let me sound the parable of the dishonest manager once more in your ears: There was a rich man who had a manager and because the manager was said to be squandering the rich man's resources, the manager is summoned by the owner who demands an accounting of the hireling's management. Said manager knows he isn't fit for any real work, and so he cooks up a scheme so that he may be welcomed into the houses of his neighbors when the time for his dismissal. The manager summons his master's debtors one by one, asks them how much they owe, and then tells them to rewrite their debt. And so each one does. The rich man, when he discovers the scheme, commends the dishonesty of the manager; the tag line of the parable is "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own than are the children of light."

The unjust, unfair manager in this morning's parable is none other than the Christ – the Lamb of God who takes our debts, our sins, and our misdeeds—and erases them, forever. Unlike the dishonest manager, however, Christ doesn't erase fifty percent or twenty percent—not even ninety-nine percent. Christ is so corrupting of divine justice that he takes away the entire sin of the whole world as it was, is, and evermore shall be.

To add more insult to this parable, Jesus observes that the crooked manager and his sort—the ones who realize their lostness—are far more Christ-like than are we, the children of light. We, the children of light, tend not just a little bit toward self-righteousness and are not so inclined to let others off the hook quite so easily. We demand an exact justice for sins—especially those of the neighborhood terrorists. We, the children of light, look at this parable of the unjust manager and say, "Oh, but the manager only took away 20%, or 50%. Some of the debt remains to be paid. What good work must the neighbor do to erase the rest of the sin? What penalty must the neighbor pay to atone for her or his sin?"

That, however, is most emphatically not what the gospel is all about. Do you want only 20%—or even only 50% of your sins forgiven? As for me, I need all my sins forgiven—or I am, beyond any doubt, truly "cooked." If I need still to be concerned with 80% of my sins—if I must be still concerned with 50% of my sins—which ones should I worry about? Which ones are forgiven? And what will happen to me if I don't pick the right ones to work out on my own? What if I don't pay for my sins in just the right way? Are any of them then forgiven??? That's the stuff that keeps us awake at night with our hearts pounding and our bodies coldly sweating. Either all my sins are forgiven—those past, those present, and those future—either there is one baptism for the forgiveness of all my sin—my state of being—or I might as well not be here—because nothing I do will ever pay for what I have done and will do, for I am in bondage to sin and cannot free myself. But thanks be to God! Jesus Christ, the disreputable manager, has swindled unto himself the entire world's sins. Jesus Christ, from the cross, becomes a far greater thief greater than any in his midst as he steals away from you and from me all our sins and every one of the penalties demanded for them.

And now, as one who has been ordered to proclaim the scandal of the gospel in season and out, in the Name of the Holy Corrupter of Fairness, in the Name of the Holy and Shrewd Swindler of Divine Justice, in the Name of the Holy Thief of Heaven, I declare unto you the entire forgiveness of all your sins. Now, go forth from this place and bear the corrupting, shrewd, and thieving Christ to the world—forgive all without cost or condition. Be merciful to all... know that God is infinitely merciful to you.