

Sermon Proper 20 C 2016

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Psalm 79:1-9

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

September 18, 2016

Bill Watson

Years ago, while serving in Kentucky, I had the good fortune of proximity to Vanderbilt University's School of Theology. This gave me the opportunity to engage in presentations with one of Vanderbilt's NT scholars, Amy Jill Levine. Prof. Levine analyzes the New Testament from her unique theological perspective. I say unique because she is an Orthodox Jew. Her perspective informs her studies of the NT. Her published work about Jesus' parables comes in her book, *Short Stories by Jesus*, which has influenced my thoughts this morning.

Parables were one of Jesus' premier teaching techniques. He was a story teller of renown. Like all good story tellers he had a way of capturing his audience to make his point. Sometimes what seems simple or straightforward is not the case when looked at more closely. That is what Amy Jill Levine's studies suggest. From her perspective, she reflects upon what Jesus may have been up to in his day. Which then is a starting point for us to consider the meaning for us today. How are we to take the ancient story and make application in our lives? That is always the question. What might Jesus be saying to us today?

Our gospel lesson today is the Parable of the Dishonest Steward or Shrewd Steward. This parable is part of a block of material found only in Luke's gospel. This follows the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin from last week. But not immediately, between last week and this week's lesson is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. A story unique to Luke's gospel about a father's loss. Recall the Parable of the Prodigal Son (which we heard back on the fourth Sunday of Lent). That parable ends with the confrontation between the father and his oldest son. The son who stayed behind. The older son who didn't take his fortune and squander it. But in terms of relationship we learn that the father has gotten his youngest son back, but has also unbeknownst to him, in many ways lost his oldest son.

As we know only too well in our day, loss can occur even in the midst of presence. We may have have experienced this in our families. Family members are in proximity but estranged for a variety of reasons, some social, some technological. But the result is separation and loss, relationships broken. No one has gone away but relationships have grown apart. The parable of the Prodigal Son ends with indecision. We are left hanging in the balance. Will the older son join the celebration or remain separated? We don't know and are left to wonder.

Then the focus shifts, from the the Prodigal Son, which was told to a large group. Then our lesson begins with the notation that Jesus has now turned his attention to his disciples. Yes, others may overhear the teaching but this seems to be directed to Jesus' followers.

So let's take a look at the parable. The first thing we need to do is establish its boundaries. Our reading is longer than the parable itself and includes other sayings that Luke has drawn together. I want to focus on the parable.

The parable (verses 1-8a) ends when the master commends the manager, "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." The remainder of the phrase (8b) is Luke's analysis of Jesus' pronouncement. "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

The parable begins, "a rich man had a manager." In their culture, this was not uncommon. Their culture was under Roman occupation and the rich man was an absentee owner. He would not be loved by most of those who were disciples or followers of Jesus. Such owners could be demanding or worse, even cruel and oppressive.

The manager may have been a servant promoted above his peers. His management we are told was such that the owner's property was being squandered. "Squandered", comes from the same verb that described how the youngest son wasted his funds in the earlier parable of the Prodigal Son. No owner can keep such a manager. This presents a crisis for both the rich man and the manager. Crisis in Chinese symbols is the same symbol as for opportunity. Every crisis is an opportunity.

We are privy to the manager's thoughts and frank assessment of his situation. His options are limited and time is of the essence. Decisions need to be made as he gathers the records for the accounting he must give to the landowner.

Quickly he acts, drawing (implicating) all those who are in debt to the rich man into his scheme. So, who were these debtors? Probably tenant farmers living off the property who pay their rent out of the harvest of the land. Not uncommonly, they were indebted to the absentee landlord, the rich man. In the manager's action he has made all of them complicit. Professor Levine's insight is that the dishonest steward has implicated all the others in the accusation of squandering. Everyone has joined in the squandering.

What happened? Well, I believe that this is where things get humorous. In C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, the senior devil warns his apprentice: "If the fact ever gets out that you and I cannot stand laughter, then the game is up and over." I think Jesus is using humor. Perhaps with a smile, the owner can only commend the manager. "You did it, pretty creative, I have to say." "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

What might Jesus be doing? Is shrewdness a Christian quality? It may not be one we associate with sainthood? But I believe that Jesus isn't opposed to shrewdness in particular settings. Perhaps Jesus is challenging the disciples. Encouraging their creativity. Encouraging a long term view of their mission. Not complacency but creativity.

The master didn't respond as we expect. Praise was offered instead of condemnation. What is Jesus saying to us today?

If we incorporate Luke's conclusion? "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." I think this is a call to creativity, a move away from the status quo, letting go of how things have always been done. **Relationships rather than possessions matter. Without his position the manager will need relationships more than ever. And that is what the manager focused on as he carried out his plan. Possessions can obscure our need for relationships. In the face of crisis, the manager appreciated just how essential relationships may be.**

This lesson may be difficult to hear in faith settings. Because in many ways we look to faith settings as containing timeless truths in the midst of unstable times. We want the church to be our strong rock, our ever stable footing in an ever changing and challenging environment.

Yet, Jesus wants us thinking on our feet. Not, this is how we have always done things. In changing times, our paths may need to shift. This doesn't mean that old allegiances are not valuable or meaningful, but if we are following Jesus, if

Jesus is leading the way; we may be led in new directions, new engagements, new insights. Not disdain the challenges of the world today, but going all in.

Jesus, I think was commending creativity. Not commending dishonesty. Yes, the manager was taking advantage of the situation but doing so with the future in mind. Looking ahead. The rich owner, the lord of the manor, didn't react with rage and violence. The manager didn't get his just desserts, but instead was commended. The owner couldn't help but marvel.

The lesson is humorous and shocks us even today. In God's kingdom, we do not get what we deserve. We receive grace instead. We receive the unmerited favor of God. We receive God's love and mercy and forgiveness. God doesn't get even. The land owner, the rich man should have gotten retribution, don't you think? But that isn't the story that Jesus told.

What might be the lesson? Perhaps we are to hold things of this world lightly. Recognizing that all we have is gift. Not to be hoarded but to be invested, shared, utilized, exchanged. Engage creatively in the world using all the gifts that God has given us.

Next weekend our Fall Stewardship Campaign will kick off with our theme: We're all in! 100% participation. Our idea of going all in, is a commitment to one another. We are creatively looking ahead to the future that God holds before us. Your Stewardship Committee is calling us to be all in for St. John's, and what it offers in worship, formation, discipleship and service. If we are truly all in, our participation will increase significantly. And that is our hope, that we will all make a commitment, that we will be all in.

Jesus I believe is encouraging us to keep our eyes on the prize., the future that God holds before us. Our salvation was earned by Jesus. That is the good news that we have to share with the world. We don't get what we deserve, instead God is merciful, loving, and caring. This knowledge stimulates our creativity. Allows us to loosen our grip. To hold possessions lightly, because what really matters are relationships. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to be "all in." With undivided loyalty, using all the gifts given to us, even our shrewdness, we are to creatively engaging our world, sharing Christ's love with all those we encounter. Perhaps at the end, we too will be commended, because we have acted shrewdly.