

September 19, 2004
Luke 16:1-13
First Parish Church
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Children of Light

Sometimes we find ourselves in embarrassing situations. It may be, as with the steward in today's story, that we have squandered the situation. Or it may just be an accident. I find many embarrassing accidents happen in the midst of new and stressful situations, like a new job.

People have been very welcoming and I have felt comfortable with you all. However, at the Outreach meeting this month, I was visibly reminded that new situations are stressful. When I had gone home that afternoon, I had taken off my work clothes and hung them up. Then, when it came time to go back to church I quickly threw my clothes back on. At the meeting, which ended up being in Fellowship Hall, it was warm, so I took off my jacket.

After a while, happening to look down, I thought my top looked a bit strange, but tried to focus on the conversation. A few minutes later I noticed again that something was out of sorts and realized I had put my top on inside out. What to do? As unobtrusively as possible I put my jacket back on. Oh well! Maybe that was the shrewd thing to do. Maybe the shrewder thing to do would have been to laugh at myself right then and there and share the humor of the situation with everyone.

The steward in today's story finds himself in an embarrassing situation. Do you suppose he was new to the job and had made some slipshod or unwise decisions? However, the charges against him are that he has been squandering the owner's property. Was he just greedy and had been gouging the accounts for years?

Today's story is one of the most intriguing and perplexing of all parables. Any commentary you pick up begins with some statement about how interpreters have been puzzling over this parable, for centuries and centuries. In fact, since it was first told.

Jesus' parables always have a twist, something unexpected- something that turns a common perception upside down. Living in a different cultural context than first century Jews, we often miss this twist. However, today's twist so catches us by surprise, so offends us -that this squandering steward is commended for his shrewdness - that we wonder, "Jesus what were you thinking? Why would you tell such a story?"

A story about a manager
-who has been squandering the property,
and then when caught,
-who plots how to further indebt people to him
so as to 'feather a bed'
in which to lay his head in the future,
-who, then, ends up reducing people's bills.

Was he cutting into the owner's profit? Did he cut back on an exorbitant interest rate the owner had been charging? Or did he simply eliminate his own commission?

Whenever I've sat with a group of folk to discuss this parable, we've ended up with more questions at the end of the conversation than we had at the beginning.

-Questions about the behavior of the manager
-Questions about the rich man and how he got to be rich in the first place. Both of the stories

in chapter 16 begin with “There was a rich man...” When Jesus says, “there was a rich man” it tends to be a heads up that something is problematic in the situation.

-Questions about who is ‘the master’ commending the steward. Is it the rich man owner or is it The Master, Jesus?

-Questions about where the original parable ends and where the gospel commentary picks up.

This is a frustrating parable and we wonder, “what’s the point?” I’ve begun to suspect that our very frustration, our multitude of questions, may be the point, itself. We find ourselves bringing our shrewd ponderings to the parable itself.

One of the things I noticed this time about the parable is the matter of to whom Jesus is speaking. In the previous chapter, which Larry talked about last week, with the three lost parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons– Jesus was speaking to the crowd. Then, the very first line of chapter 16 reports, “Then Jesus said to the **disciples.**” This is a significant shift. Now he is specifically talking to the disciples. He’s no longer preaching on the street corner. He’s not introducing novices to the good news. He’s talking to those who are following him most closely. He’s talking to those who show up for church each Sunday, who come to midweek Bible Study, or “Around the Table” conversation, or caregiver’s support group, or who volunteer as a receptionist in the office, attend meetings, or paint offices and classrooms. Jesus is talking to those who live and eat and heal and preach with him on a day-to-day basis.

We often say Jesus taught through parables. When we speak of Jesus as teacher we tend to think of our modern day teacher-student relationship, where you go to class and the teacher imparts information to the students. If you read scripture closely, the relationship between Jesus and his followers is most often referred to as a master-disciple relationship.

The disciples live, eat, breath, and minister with Jesus on a day-to-day basis. They learn as much by osmosis as they do from direct teaching. There is nothing about their lives that is separate from their relationship with the master. They are disciples. I’m more comfortable with the word disciples than I am with the word master. Maybe it’s because of our history with slavery. In today’s cultural context the word master, in referring to Jesus is probably more like the word guru from Eastern religious traditions. The teacher/master/guru gives more challenging lessons to the disciples/graduate students than to those who have just beginning the journey.

This parable is something more challenging, something to chew on. It is like a gem, which as you turn from facet to facet, presents new perspectives and new questions each time. For those of you who know Eastern traditions, it’s like a Zen koan.

Sometimes, naively, we expect Christian living to make everything easy, but it doesn’t. The disciples know that. Jesus knows that. He wants them to bring all that they are, even their shrewdness to faithful living. He’s not suggesting that we live like the steward, squandering and then covering up thru shrewdness. Rather he is saying there are times for **faithful** shrewdness.

Shrewd is an interesting word. We know it includes cleverness, but we sense there is a bit of fishiness to the word. Children learn about shrewdness.

When my children were very young I helped them brush their teeth before going to bed. As they got older I would remind them to brush their teeth. Then I began to ask them if they remembered to brush their teeth. Sometimes they would say no and trudge grudgingly off to the bathroom. Sometimes they would say yes. One evening I remember in particular, I asked if they had brushed their teeth and they said yes. Somehow, with that parental instinct that

you can't quite put your finger on, I knew something was up. So I looked at them and then I thought for a minute. Then I rephrased my question. "Have you brushed your teeth, tonight?" They smiled and said, "Well, you didn't ask us that. You just asked if we'd brushed our teeth. And we did this morning." They were shrewd and fishy.

If you look up shrewd in the dictionary the first three definitions are positive: 1) astute or sharp in practical matters, 2) keen, 3) artful; marked by cleverness or perceptiveness.

Clever tricksters are popular in Jewish folklore. We see one of them in the patriarchs – Jacob, who deceived his father, cheated his brother, and then manipulated matters to end up with most of his father-in-law's flock. Jacob was shrewd, but he was also fishy. However, if we follow his story until it connects to the story of Moses, we encounter shrewd faithfulness in the characters of Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives.

Remember the Exodus story begins with Jacob's son, Joseph, making it possible for the whole family to move to Egypt during a time of famine in Israel. They flourished in Egypt until a new king, a new Pharaoh, comes to power. This pharaoh is uneasy about the increasing presence of the Israelites, and over time begins to treat them as slaves. Then his hatred of the Israelites intensifies, bringing us to the story of Shiphrah and Puah.

(from The Message, by Eugene Peterson)
The king of Egypt had a talk with the two Hebrew midwives; one was named Shiphrah and the other Puah. He said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the sex of the baby. If it's a boy, kill him; if it's a girl, let her live."

But the midwives had far too much respect for God and didn't do what the king of Egypt ordered; they let the boy babies live. The king of Egypt called in the midwives. "Why didn't

you obey my orders? You've let those babies live!"

The midwives answered Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women aren't like the Egyptian women; they're vigorous. Before the midwife can get there, they've already had the baby."

God was pleased with the midwives.

Shiphrah and Puah were shrewd. Pharaoh probably thought they were fishy. They were civilly disobedient. They were also faithfully shrewd. They were children of light.

As followers of Jesus, we are to be children of light. There is the light of grace - the light that surrounds, embraces and supports us as pure gift, as Larry spoke of last week. Today's story reminds us that we are also called to the bright light of clarification- a light that illuminates things in the shadows, that sheds light on injustice and gives us the keenness, astuteness, artfulness to act for the gospel, to act for God.

