



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 15 – Proper 20 Year C

Shrewdness

[RCL]: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Every now and then, we come upon a passage of Scripture that is especially challenging to preach on. Sometimes, the homiletical difficulty comes from the fact that the text is so familiar that just about everything that can be said about it has been said. Think of familiar texts like the Christmas stories or the Resurrection accounts; the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son.

Then, at other times, texts are difficult for exactly the opposite reason: they're so confusing that we spend so much time explaining the text that we never get around to actually preaching the Good News! The sermon becomes a protracted theological treatise that bores the faithful and bypasses any possibility of transformation. It's little wonder that Martin Luther once said of preaching passages such as these, "Sometimes you have to squeeze the Biblical text until it leaks the Gospel."

Such is the case today.

Luke's Gospel tells of a dishonest manager who is about to be fired for misappropriating company funds. He considers restitution for his embezzlement, but he's unwilling to resort to manual labor, and he's too proud to ask for charity, so he visits all of the vendors who owe his employer money and he convinces them to falsify their invoices so that it appears that they owe the master less than what they do.

The manager does this in order to develop a *quid pro quo* relationship: if he does the vendors a favor now by making it seem like they owe less than what they do, then they'll be more likely to do him a favor later—like give him a job once he gets fired for corruption from his last job. And if they don't, he can reveal their trade secret: that they falsified their invoices!

From this distance, the story sounds like it was ripped from the news headlines of the latest political or financial scandal. But then Jesus—the morally incorruptible, ethical exemplar—does something that nobody expects: He praises the corrupt manager!

So, is that it? Is the point here that Jesus wants us to be deceitful? Are we called to cheat others when our own neck is on the line?

Hopefully, we can all agree that the answer is an emphatic *no*. Jesus doesn't want us to save ourselves by deceiving and cheating others. So why does Jesus praise the dishonest manager?

There are a couple of possibilities.

First, at least part of what Jesus is trying to say to us here in Luke's Gospel is that just as the Body of Christ is not just about hands and feet; so too, the Body of Christ is not just about the heart. It's also about the brain; it's about thinking and thinking critically.

How many times have you served on a committee, or a task force, or a nonprofit board, alongside people who are passionate about the issue of the day: homelessness, child hunger, medical research, literacy—you name it? But apart from their passion, other critically needed skills and perspectives are woefully absent. Not a single person in the room has the desire or the capacity to think critically about the financial implications of the project, or how the law might apply, or the perspective needed to appreciate and account for the needs of the community and the resources present. There is no self-differentiation or desire to learn more or seek wisdom from others.

Without the ability to think critically and share our expertise with others, no amount of passion or money or creativity will bring our goals—worthy as they may be—to fruition.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Fred Craddock writes of the Christian bias toward words like “shrewdness” and “cleverness:” “The words have so commonly been associated with self-serving behavior, if not ethically questionable behavior, that it is difficult to speak of a ‘shrewd saint.’” But the problem, Craddock observes, is not with the behavior, it's with the “Anticerebral bias in the church and the unwillingness...to conceive of thinking as a kingdom activity.”¹

In praising the manager, Jesus is not praising his dishonesty; rather, he is praising his shrewdness and creativity. He's praising the manager's ability to utilize his capacity for critical thinking as a tool for building up the Body of Christ and bringing about the Kingdom of God.

And you know, that's hard to hear, isn't it—Jesus praising a man who committed a fraud. But herein lies yet another place where the Good News of the Gospel might leak from this passage.

Towards the end of the reading, we hear Jesus say this: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

At first, we may be tempted to utilize this verse to indict the manager for his dishonesty. He has been dishonest in his dealings and his handling of that which belongs to another, so he cannot be trusted with true riches. Sounds straightforward enough.

But perhaps there is another possibility.

¹ Fred Craddock, “Luke” in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 191.

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For every reason that we have to condemn the manager, there is an equally important reason to forgive him.

Yes, to quote the Scripture, he is “dishonest in a very little,” but can we really be so sure that he is not also faithful in very little, too? Are not we all a complicated mixture of faithfulness and frustration; of dishonesty and determination?

Perhaps the manager was a good father; a faithful and loving husband. Maybe he took care of the yard for his aging neighbors and shared fresh vegetables from his garden with the widow across the street. Come to think of it, doesn't the manager come in early on Thursday mornings so he can leave in time to work the soup kitchen?

When we find ourselves caught off guard by someone's immoral or unethical behavior—especially when we're on the receiving end of it—we have a tendency to second-guess the sincerity of every single word they've ever spoken, and doubt the intentions behind every single action they've ever done, in an effort to insulate ourselves from the pain of being wronged.

Then after agonizing over and second-guessing every last detail of a relationship, we begin to think of the person who committed the immoral or unethical behavior, not as a person who made a mistake, but as a bad person. And when we change the conversation from being about questionable behavior into a conversation about personhood, when we reduce them to being a *bad person*, they become *disposable*—*unworthy* of our concern, and certainly undeserving of our forgiveness.

We have other labels for this too: a person who commits a crime ceases to be a person and instead becomes a criminal or an inmate. A person who enters the country illegally is reduced to an illegal immigrant. A person caught in the cycle of addiction disintegrates into the lexicon of addict or user or pill head. The language we use to refer to people whose behavior we find morally or ethically objectionable betrays us. They become something less than a person; something unworthy or unfit for our care and concern.

Jesus' praise of the manager is not an endorsement of unethical behavior; rather, his praise of the manager is an affirmation of his personhood; of his identity as a beloved—albeit broken—part of the Body of Christ, and a builder of the Kingdom of God.

So perhaps what Jesus is teaching us is that words matter. Perhaps he's reminding us that critical thinking does not betray the heart of Christianity. And at the end of the day, perhaps Jesus is calling us to second-guess ourselves; to re-evaluate our presuppositions and judgments. Because when we do that—when we err on the side of mercy and forgiveness—the Kingdom becomes just a little bigger, and the Body of Christ becomes just a little stronger.

Amen.

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