

A parable is a story Jesus gives people; they can take it home and think about it as they prepare a meal. They can think about it as they clean up, think about it as they go to sleep. There is something conveyed in the way Jesus tells these stories. He offers critical wisdom for living their lives, living that is hard and surrounded by the presence of Roman power. Life is not easy in the Palestine of Jesus' day. To uncover the secrets of God's kingdom, he speaks truths they want to understand. Parables are Jesus' own literary creation which connects "the ordinariness of life with the extraordinary nature of God." The hearer is often the one who struggles with the meaning, just as it is the preacher who struggles to interpret what is going on. Sometimes a parable seems more like a puzzle that cannot be solved and everyone ends up frustrated.

Why would Jesus tell a story that makes right behavior so inappropriate? In this particular parable, he offers the example of someone who acts in a way that seems completely opposite to what he teaches. The character is underhanded and selfish. He is only concerned about himself. Some want him to get what is coming to him.

Instead of being punished or caught or reprimanded, he is commended. He succeeds. His former employer praises him for the way he manages things. Perhaps you hear it in disbelief; why he is not held responsible? It seems the teaching moment is lost. There is yet another insult. The one who is the thief gets it; people who believe in God do not. We are left wondering "What is the point?"

Sometimes Jesus uses a different kind of character to represent God. In Luke 11, Jesus wonders what it would be if you needed food late at night. You have a late house guest who is hungry. You go to the home of a friend. This friend is sleepy and ill. "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything." Jesus says even though he says he will not get up, if you are persistent, he will get out of bed and give you what you need. He uses this irritable friend to teach about prayer with the phrase, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

Jesus uses this to say something to people of faith who sometimes don't get it. This unjust manager in Luke 16 "understood how to use what was entrusted to him to serve a larger goal." Jesus is using a questionable character to say to disciples and interested hearers, "how much more" should children of God understand the wealth God has given them to use.

The unjust manager has an end in mind. The situation he is in is falling all around him. "He understood that, in order to be where he wanted to be in the future, how he handled today counted." Solomon penned a well-known saying, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 29:18 KJV) This particular parable we are reading today speaks to Christians and faith communities who have lost their vision of the larger picture. They have forgotten who the people of God are. They have forgotten what they have been called to do. When people have no idea where they are headed, the treasure God provides is not seen as treasure at all. When people do not know where they are headed, the resources in front of them are simply things that have no value beyond an immediate need. Often these are misused, misplaced or manipulated for some other purpose.

Among those in the crowds are Pharisees. Pharisees were characterized as "lovers of money." (16:14) As leaders of God's chosen people, as keepers of God's wealth, they were like the dishonest steward. They had misplaced their own vision of what God had called them to be. They had traded in God's vision to become keepers of the wealth of the present time. "Controlled by wealth, by money, even complacency, they had blended into society and lost their vision." So to address these Pharisees, Jesus says essentially, "You can either serve this present age and loves its wealth, or you can love God and serve God in this present age. You cannot do both. One leads to death and the other leads to life."

As God's people today we are not only entrusted with a vision of what God wants for us. We are also entrusted with resources. With these resources, we are God's stewards. However we plan to use them, we may well use a vision of what we hope our end will be. "The parable warns that the

children have lost that eternal perspective of who God is and who we are in relationship to God. Too easily," says one scholar, "we separate life as it is now from life in the future kingdom." Back at Easter we were dressing up and remembering, "Jesus is alive! He has risen!" but already we are whispering our faith because we do not quite believe it anymore.

Somewhere in the middle of our journey we stopped living for God. We stopped remembering that Jesus died and was raised and that life was made new. Somewhere along the way it became easier to serve all the pressing demands: of people, of schedule, of money. Somewhere along the way the vision for God's call became cloudy and muddled. We stopped hearing God's voice. Or perhaps we never heard God's voice. Somewhere along the way, the demands and challenges became so much bigger than the answers. So we huddled in an effort to save whatever was left. We did not keep the vision. We did not "begin with the end in mind" as Steven Covey has taught. We buried our resources or misplace them.

Malcolm Muggeridge writes "A Twentieth-Century Testimony":

When I look back on my life nowadays, which I sometimes do, what strikes me most forcibly about it is that what seemed at the time most significant and seductive, seems now most futile and absurd. For instance, success in all of its various guises; being known and being praised; ostensible pleasures, like acquiring money...or traveling, going to and fro in the world and up and down in it like Satan, explaining and experiencing whatever Vanity Fair has to offer. In retrospect, all these exercises in self-gratification seem pure fantasy, what Pascal called, "licking the earth." (115, Covey)

Stephen Covey uses this testimony to encourage his readers to become principle centered. He teaches people "to begin with the end in mind." He suggests it is important to always keep in front of us what is most critical, just as the unjust manager keeps before him the reality that he is in need of doing something to save his own hide.

Here is the issue Jesus addresses with this parable. Children of light have lost their vision for God. "It is easy to grow complacent about responsibilities God gives us. The parable is a call to reclaim who we are and to renew our vision today for the kingdom of God beyond us and among us." (92,94,96, Debevoise)

Just now we are in the process of reclaiming who we are as a congregation. With the help of God's word and the sharing of many groups, we are seeking to renew our vision for the kingdom of God beyond us and among us. Even as we complete these small group conversations, there looms on the horizon the opportunity to use our gifts for the vision we discern to be God's vision for us. May we make the choice between God and money. May we begin with the end in mind that God has for this congregation. This is the great gift we offer these baptized children. We keep our minds trained on this vision of the future and we keep growing into the faithful congregation God had in mind all along.

Almighty God, we thank you for the resources that are ours. We are grateful also for the faith to call ourselves your children. Enable us to remember this parable. Teach us to learn from an unjust manager how to keep ourselves focused on what is important. Empower us to make the right choice between You and money. These are important days in which we live. Help us to understand the eternal importance of what we do here and now. Just as Jesus' parables have been used through the centuries to uncover important truth, let this one uncover something important for us too. We pray for those who cannot hear these words. We pray for loved ones who need healing and hope. Allow us to continue reaching out to those who need your compassion and care. We pray as Jesus has taught us. Our Father who art in heaven...

Works Cited

Covey, Stephen R., The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Simon and Schuster, New York, New York, 1989.

Debevoise, Helen Montgomery, *Luke 16:1-13, Pastoral Perspective, Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, General Editors, Westminster John Know Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2010.