

A Puzzling Parable

Opening

If you ever wonder about fairness regarding topics and the preaching schedule, remember this day! I compose the schedule and I scheduled myself for the story of the dishonest manager. And, the readings from (Amos) and 1 Timothy are no walk in the park either. But I cannot adequately address every tricky passage in one sermon this Sunday, so I have chosen one: Jesus' tricky parable about a dishonest manager. Let's get into this puzzle and wrestle with it.

My feelings about this parable are the same sentiments that Winston Churchill expressed about Russia. Churchill famously said Russia was "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."¹ I cannot promise that at the end of my remarks today you will clearly understand this story. If there is an example of a story where good, orthodox scholars widely disagree, this is it. Who represents the rich patron? Who represents the shrewd manager? What about the debtors? Does Jesus endorse back alley deals?

We're in a similar position as the readers of Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The protagonist, Edwin Drood, is murdered, yet there is no clarity about whodunnit by the end of the story. Dickens died before he completed the novel.

Most people believed the culprit was Drood's uncle, John Jasper, and forty years after its publication, the Dickens Fellowship, led by authors such as George Bernard Shaw and G.K. Chesterton held a mock trial for the fictional John Jasper. Shaw played the role of jury foreman, plaintiff and defendant attorneys were appointed, and Chesterton was the judge. Shaw presented the jury's verdict of manslaughter at the end of the case, but said there wasn't enough evidence to convict Jasper as the accused. Chesterton then ruled the mystery of Edwin Drood unsolvable and held everyone in contempt of court, except himself. ²

¹ BBC Broadcast, 10.1.39

² *The New York Times*, Front Page, January 8, 1914, via Wikipedia.com

I confess to you much of this parable *still* escapes me. I know that I've preached on it before, I *fear* what I said back then, and I studied this story more this week than any previous occasions. I still can't convincingly say I comprehend this story. Verse 9, in particular, is the riddle, wrapped in the mystery, inside an enigma: 'And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.'

There are perplexing readings in the New Testament where even NT Wright cannot save you. I think he reads this one wrong, but I'm not convinced his scholarly colleagues have solved the puzzle. I have more questions today than I have answers.

So a disclaimer if you should share your convincing interpretation to me after the service. I'm likely to quote the prophet Isaiah to you: 'Woe to you who walk by the light of your fire, and by the torches that you have kindled!' ³

Instead of the pretense of a convincing opinion, I have something else in mind. Let's consider three questions:

- General question: why do we read difficult passages?
- Specific question: how do we read *this* story?
- How does this puzzle of a story fit with our own story?

Why We Read a Riddle

Now there is a parable within this parable that we even read this story today. There is already a confession that "Jesus is Lord" and "we belong to his Church" by meditating on his story. I personally would like to extend last week's meditation about the lost things parables. But that's not where the Church leads us today and I have no sense the Holy Spirit calling us in a different direction today.

³ Isaiah 50.11

A Puzzling Parable

I have sat often where you sit. After 15 years of ministry, the pew still feels more native than the pulpit for me. I know those Sundays when you come to church with spiritual enthusiasm. You are ready to worship, ready to hear the Gospel, and then you hear a topic that just doesn't match your interest or enthusiasm.

Other Sundays you come to church weary and worn out. Your heart longs for comfort and hope. You're hoping *this* is the day that God breaks through the struggle you've carried for months. And you sit down to learn it's Stewardship Sunday. You hear a sermon about money when actually you're feeling emotionally or spiritually bankrupt. You feel lost and alone and we're reading a story about the trappings of wealth.

Return with me in your pew Bible to Luke 16 on page ###. The way of Jesus is puzzling, it's perplexing, it doesn't fit with our logic. And Luke 15 and 16 are perfect evidence of the sudden shifts that come with following Jesus. Last week we heard Jesus share his love for the lost treasures of the Kingdom of God, sinners and tax men, in three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. He addressed those stories to Pharisees and scribes, rich elders who criticized Jesus' association with scandalous company.

You hear these three stories in Luke 15, full of compassion, and when you arrive at Luke 16 you see we're still in the same conversation. It's like the Lord took a deep breath after the three parables of lost things, then held forth about wealth with the parable of the dishonest manager. Same conversation, very little pause, the only change is the *target* of the story. The **disciples** were the target of this dishonest manager parable; the Pharisees and scribes the target of the lost things stories.

I don't know why he does this. This is what He's like. This is the way he tells stories. Somehow these stories belong together (more on that in a moment), but I don't understand why it's got to be this way.

If I read the Bible on my own terms, I'd make my personal playlist and I'd play the hits. Let's have 1 Corinthians 13 cued up for the morning playlist to get the day started right. Let's have the Beatitudes on repeat and the Easter stories ready when I'm feeling sad. But I didn't write the Gospel. The Gospel doesn't just lead me into personal relationship with God, it

leads me into *the Kingdom of God*. And that means facing subjects I'd rather not face; topics I'm not in the mood to address, reading stories I don't fully understand.

I don't read the Bible so that I can master its meaning; the Word of God is meant to master me, even when I can't make sense of things. I stand underneath the Word of God, not just for my personal relationship with Him, but for the sake of becoming a faithful servant in His Kingdom with his Church. And some Scriptures require I read and re-read and re-read, not just by myself, but *with* the Church and her leaders, with her saints and martyrs, reading one story in light of the whole of Scripture.

I read a poet this week who helped me see that within every question is a quest. I carry my questions, seeking to be faithful to Jesus. That is the quest within every question: not my own knowledge or power, but faithfulness to King Jesus and his Kingdom.

Excursus on 1 Timothy

That's how we, as Anglicans, have wrestled with Paul's difficult words about the teaching role of women in the church. You don't dismiss Paul's words about the role of women teaching in 1 Timothy or make it say what you want it to say, one way or another. You can't blunt the edge of a sharp word. You do business with this text.

But you also don't read a difficult text isolated from its greater story. You read and interpret this Scripture in light of the whole counsel of God. This takes time and work; prayer and conversation. You read this Scripture in light of other Scripture and our tradition. You consider how Paul praised Phoebe and her leadership role in the church, likely as a deaconess. You remember how Paul spoke of other women as fellow-workers in the Gospel: Euodia, Syntheche, and Prisca in Romans and Corinthians; how women like Philip's daughters received the gift of prophecy which would be spoken aloud in church.

Our diocese affirms the spiritual leadership of women, ordaining women to the office of deacon, but not to the priesthood. The office of deacon is a preaching and teaching order. Our College of Bishops and our own bishop, Archbishop Foley Beach, believe the weight of Scripture and tradition includes the teaching role of women. To be sure, not every

individual Anglican Christian agrees with this conclusion, though this is our diocese's practice. And we respect those who have seriously wrestled with Scripture and arrive at a different conclusion. We all are humbly seeking faithfulness our Lord Jesus Christ.

How We Read This Parable

From one difficult passage to another—I'm going to need a good nap this afternoon—let's look more closely at this enigmatic parable. This story resists a simple interpretation. Thank you, Captain Obvious! What isn't obvious is this story's correlation with the parable of the prodigal son. Jesus tells these stories back to back. These two stories are like two songs that have the same melody but different lyrics. We know the tune to *My Country 'Tis of Thee*, but if you hear that same tune in London, instantly you'll notice different lyrics in the opening line: "God save our noble queen..." We are indeed two countries separated by a common language.

So also with these parables. Both parables have a wealthy landowner and an inferior who squanders wealth. Both stories have a crisis and the strategic plan of restoring lost fortune. Both stories are hoping against hope for mercy from the fortunes they lost. On the surface, the melody sounds the same.

But the lyrics are different. We absolutely should read the Parable of the Prodigal Son as an allegory where God the Father offers a radical, merciful welcome to his wayward child. But try to read the parable of the dishonest manager in the same way and it doesn't work. If you find yourself struggling to know who's who in the zoo of this story, to plug in other figures for the characters in this story, then there's a reason for that. It just doesn't work. This is where I believe NT Wright gets it wrong. I believe that Jesus tells this story, not to describe specific characters, *per se*, but to describe an entire age that functions under the rule of Mammon, a false god that cannot save.

All have bent the knee to the god of Mammon. Shrewdness rules the roost in the House of Mammon. Those are the vices of that opposing kingdom. That's how things work there, but will the disciples of God's kingdom follow his ways and his rules? That's the question.

If this *were* an allegory, it would be more like one of those Agatha Christie mysteries where *all* the characters committed the crime. I won't tell you which, though you've had plenty of time to read her stories, and should!

I remember watching a film years ago with friends where everyone behaved badly toward one another, each in different ways. Betrayal and lying and all sorts. My friend asked me, "What did you think?" I said, "I thought it was terrible." And my friend said, "That's why I think it's a great story. That's exactly what the filmmaker wanted you to feel."

My best sense is that Jesus the Storyteller wants us to see how corrupt and conniving "children of this age" are. It works like a contrast story compared with the extravagant mercy of the Father who welcomed his prodigal son with grace.

Faithful Servants in a Fallen Age

That's my best sense of Jesus' story here. But I'm not convinced. That's the best I have with the light that's been given me today. I still got questions for the Lord about verses 8 and 9.

But what I don't want to do is ruminate on questions that escape my understanding and miss what Jesus *clearly* says in verses 10-13. "One who is faithful in a little is faithful in much, and one who is dishonest with a little is dishonest with much." What's interesting is that all those debts in the story—oil, wheat, and more, were immense amounts. Some would have equaled a year and half of wages. Jesus says, "these are little riches compared to the true riches that await." Will you be faithful with the little riches?

And in Luke's Gospel, faithfulness with money always means good news for the poor. In other words, the disciples of King Jesus are to take their money and possessions from dishonest systems and a dishonest age and creatively help 'the least of these' in God's kingdom.

What might this look like? I heard one theologian recommend cultivating different virtues of consumption. That low prices is not the ultimate standard for us. We believe in the image of

God and we ought to care about who produces the food we consume and the goods we purchase. And we ought to use whatever wealth we *do* have t

I recently read the memoir of a farmer my same age who struggled for years to make a profit by selling through local farmer's markets. The inequality of labor for the commodities he produced was heartbreaking. Partly through his story, partly through my own conviction to reconnect with the place where I live, I began weekly visits to the Dixie Lee Farmer's Market. We still shop at grocery stores, too, but it's become important to me to support local farmers, because there I can see the faces and know the names of those who produce my food. I found one stall there of Etowah farmers where I bought corn, okra, and tomatoes this summer. You know why I chose them? Because my wife played in Etowah fields as a little girl; her grandmother and grandfather lived there, raised children, welcomed grandchildren there. I'd like to make friends with the struggling farmers of Etowah.

I had the most delightful conversation with a Jamestown farmer yesterday over a simple transaction of butternut squash, garlic, and red-leaf lettuce. I learned about his faith and the hard work of farming. I left with the beginning of a friendship. I'd like to think this puzzle of a parable led me to make friends with this little paper dollar bills that are passing away.

We might pay a little more, but price isn't the ultimate standard. We're praying Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. We serve a Lord who desires that all have enough, that all image bearers come into the joy of the Kingdom.

Conclusion

Well we have reached the end and I will confess this: I'm glad that this story only appears in Luke's Gospel. That means with our lectionary it won't come around again until September 2022. Thomas, make a note in your calendar.

I've given you my best sense of this difficult story, but I'm still not entirely sure. I've still got questions that won't be answered today. That's ok. I don't need all my questions answered to be faithful. For within the question is a quest with the Word of God, with you, my fellow sojourners in the Lord, and most of all with God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.