

If you Google ‘the most difficult parable to understand’, today’s parable of the dishonest steward is what you will find. No one wants to preach on it - as you may notice I’m up here in the pulpit and Will is over there. If nothing else, it’s a little puzzling. A rich man discovers that his steward has squandered the resources he was supposed to be protecting. Maybe he just put his feet up while the crops rotted or he skimmed some off the top, we don’t exactly know. But whatever form it took, his negligence was enough for this rich man to fire him.

The steward was lucky not to be headed for jail but still he is headed for disgrace, and poverty. He doesn’t have any illusions about the quality of his work. He doesn’t offer a word in defense of himself. The future he faces is grim. He’s not strong – no manual labor for him. And, he’s proud. Just the thought of begging makes his hands sweat. What can he do? What will become of him?

They say, there is nothing like the prospect of hanging to focus the mind – the same is apparently true for unemployment. The steward’s mind races and he hits upon a plan. He will go to all those who owe his rich boss money and will give them huge discounts. They will be so grateful that he will never have to eat at home again. So, he puts this plan into action and the rich man hears about it.

When we hear that, we can hardly wait for him to get what’s coming to him. And, then, what? What??? The rich man commends him. Praises his shrewdness! What? Wait just a darn minute here. The rich man approves? Jesus....what the heck? What are you doing, Jesus, letting that guy get away with theft? And even worse, what are you doing praising him for his cleverness? Do you not see? He’s not repentant, he’s just scared. This isn’t the kind of story we want. We want the villain vilified. We expect reprisals, punishment, comeuppance. But leave it to Jesus to let this thief get away with it. Not only get away with it, but earn praise for his newest scheme.

Scholars have devised many convoluted explanations for this parable so what we hear is not really what we hear, but the obvious and difficult meaning is that the rich man was impressed by the Steward’s cleverness.

So, is this true? This steward is a bad guy, there’s no other interpretation. And we’re meant to include him in the good news anyway? We want Jesus out there calling the wicked to account, so we can stand behind him and yell, “yeah, what he said”. It’s great to be on the side of the right. Until, of course, Jesus turns around to us.

Looking at us, looking at the Steward, looking at thieves, Jesus looks at us all the same. Jesus didn’t come as a moral lesson to us; he came to show us who God is and how God loves us. No one likes to think of Jesus on the side of the crooks. But he was right up there until the end, thieves on crosses on both sides of Jesus.

The Rich Man can see that the steward is never going to stop squandering what he has been given to oversee – so the Rich Man takes it away from him. And, voila, presto-chango, the Steward gets off his keester and devises a plan. The Rich Man hears about it and says, “there, that’s what I’m talking about!” See how clever you can be when it is your future that’s at stake. That’s how I want you to think about my resources, my future.

When I moved into my first apartment, in my selfish 20s, my partner and I needed to divvy up the two closets – one conventional and one, larger, but with a strange configuration. We flipped or something and I got the conventional closet and she got the larger, odd one. As we unpacked, she was having trouble figuring out how to use hers. She asked for my help and I gave her some vague suggestion about folding things, putting in hooks, or something unimaginative. She was unhappy. I think I thought she might leave me, so I volunteered to switch closets and we did. I studied my new closet and figured out how I could put a rod in a certain places and cubby holes in another – that it could actually hold a lot of stuff. When Dyan, my partner saw it – she said, ‘oh, so that’s what you can come up with when it’s YOUR closet. I asked you for help and you gave me nothing.’ Lots of apologies and another closet switch later and we were back on track. It was amazing how my wheels turned when they were turning for me.

This whole scripture seems to be about money. Money is not something we talk about easily; but it is something that we, well at least I, think about a lot. When the mail arrives, when Carol is in the basement and yells up, “Judy, could you come down here and take a look at something?”, When Autumn tells us about her new first choice for college. We somehow feel that one of the central messages of the Bible, of Christianity, is that money is bad - Sell all that you have and follow me. And it’s true the Bible talks about money a lot - most often in decrying the inequity; in trying to get us to see the poor; to think in communal terms - that when we see need, it is incumbent upon us to do something. There is no beloved community with some of us laying our heads on soft pillows at night, while others compete in order to lay their head closest to heating grate on the sidewalk.

And lest you think I’m lecturing you, let me say that I have rarely encountered more generous people. And I don’t think it is just inside these walls. Yesterday at the Community day at the farmer’s market, I thought I would be able to find our table easily, but I had to wade through table after table of groups and organizations who are devoting themselves to addressing the need in the world to find ours. And it is not just the rich among you. Money is not the answer to the world’s problems without vision, energy, priorities and love.

And that’s what this whole scripture asks us. Where are you going to put your attention? And why? That’s what the rich man was asking, “how come you couldn’t do this when you were serving me?” It’s not a question of are you rich or not, it’s not a question of how successful you are at what you attempt. It is who are you serving, with money or without it? No slave can serve two masters. Listen to that language: No slave can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth.

No one can. You cannot. You cannot serve two masters - God and wealth; wealth and gambling; gambling and family; family and wanderlust; and on and on. We have each chosen who we will serve. Even if it is only a preference by a skooch. Perhaps, we don’t even recognize or acknowledge that choice.

If we’ve chosen earthly things - you know, the schedule, your spouse, your children, yourself, your budget. If we’ve chosen earthly things - we often find them competing for first place. The thing about serving God is that God can be with us in all those other things clamoring for our attention. With God as our highest priority, we have help when deciding whether to reach for the remote or the pouting child. No value judgment - sometimes the remote is the right choice.

Always, serving God is the right choice.