

Giving Away the Master's Riches

Jesus often teaches in parables, and though they are never quite what we would call simple and straightforward, with a little thought most of them can be deciphered. Today's however, is particularly puzzling and takes a lot of pondering to make any sense of, and to be perfectly honest, I'm not sure I have, but I am going to share my thoughts and maybe after you think about it you can share yours with me, and we can end up closer to the heart of God together.

The problem for me comes in the fact that normally parables tell us about the kingdom of God, they often even start with those words: "The kingdom of God is like..." Think of some famous examples. There is the one where Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a vineyard owner who hires workers in the morning, and then at noon, and then only an hour before quitting time, but then pays them all the same, and while it might frustrate us, we are reminded that in the kingdom of God the only important thing is that you respond to the call and show up, because your reward is the same no matter when you started working for God. Or the famous prodigal son story, where the son went off and squandered all his father's wealth, but when he comes home, destitute, he is still welcomed in with open arms and a lavish celebration because he is still a child of the father and nothing he does can change that. Or last week's parable about the one lost sheep and the shepherd abandoning the ninety-nine to go find him because that one is as important to God as all the others. These stories are ideals. It is easy to pick out a God-figure, and to learn something about the very nature of God's love for us that makes us hopeful for the coming reign of the kingdom of God.

But today's parable is not particularly aspirational or inspiring. There is a dark realism about it that kind of takes me aback. Let's take a look at the details. There is an accusation leveled against the manager, that he is squandering the master's property. Two things strike me. First, it is never substantiated. It's not clear that he is in fact doing what he is accused of. And second, he is not accused of being dishonest, but more like lazy or derelict in his duties. He is squandering wealth, not getting all it is worth, but not stealing it. The manager panics and thinks he will be fired. This all seems utterly unfair. So in an unfair situation, he does the best thing he can think to do – he starts building favor with those with whom he has done business in the past by reducing their debts. And this shrewdness wins him the favor of his master.

This parable does not paint a portrait of the kingdom of God. This is a picture of the world in which we currently live. Who has not been falsely accused of something and yet sure that we will still suffer undue consequences for it nonetheless. We will all face unfair situations. The question though remains, 'what did you do, even in those moments, with what you had to help others?'

Think about the example of Jesus himself in this world. He was accused of all sorts of things he didn't do, even put on trial for them and convicted in the absence of real evidence. I think he knew that was coming, and so in the meantime he used every opportunity he had to curry favor with potential followers, to make friends like the manager did by giving away the riches of the kingdom. He came across the sick and healed them. He came across the hungry and

filled their stomachs. And the one that made the Pharisees really angry – he came across sinners and forgave them, lavishly, sometimes without their even asking for it. He gave away all he had control over at every moment.

Bad things are going to happen to you, not least of which is that in the end, no matter what kind of life you live, you will eventually face death, fair or not. But what do you do in the meantime with the resources you have to make other's lives better? What debts did you forgive? Where did you offer second chances? Where did you ease someone's overburdened life? I think about the stories of the first missionaries who went to India. They thought they would be thrown out as soon it was discovered who they were and what they were doing there. So they went and hung out among the untouchable class where no one would look for them, and they told them that they were loved by God. Untouchable inherently means unlovable, so this was world changing, a debt they could never repay, and they were won over. The missionaries were found and thrown out, but there remains a strong Christian presence among the descendants of those first followers hundreds of years later.

I think this is what Jesus means when he talks about the shrewdness of the children of this age being superior to that of the children of light. I think he is saying something like, "why is it that companies can find ways to sell all kinds of digital junk with planned obsolescence, in a way that makes people think they can't possibly live a meaningful life without it, and yet you have the greatest thing in the world that will stand the test of time and you don't know how to market it and proclaim it in a way that makes people think it is important to their lives?" Or "why is it that dishonest corporations can build brand loyalty even while taking advantage of people, but the church is losing people left and right even though they have the promise that the God of the universe will never leave you or forsake you to offer?"

I think the parable may be telling us, there will come a reckoning, deserved or not, but in the meantime, why are we not using all the resources of God we have access to to more shrewdly win people over? We have the inexhaustible riches of God's love, and yet we hoard it instead of giving it away. I am reminded of the example of Becca Stevens, an Episcopal priest who spoke at last year convention. She runs a place called Magdalen House for women rescued from sex trafficking. The women who live in the house get to own it, set their own rules, and learn some trade or skill that can make them productive and self-sufficient in the long run. She is constantly worried that neighbors will force them out of certain neighborhoods for unfair reasons that basically come down to the fact that some people don't want to admit that this sort of thing exists in their world. But in the meantime, she will use every day and every resource to convince these women that they are loved by God, capable of healing and being restored, and empowered to live a productive life.

Forgiving debts, sins, trespasses, is part of what we are about. How often do we tell people that they can start over again? How often do we relieve burdens, even if those burdens were justly earned? How do we shower God's abundance onto others so that they are profoundly grateful? We can throw open access to God's own table and say you can all come. We should be extravagant with the wealth of God's abundant mercy, by proclaiming forgiveness. What if we trained everyone to be shrewd managers of God's abundance, giving it away at every chance we got to win others over? What if we pronounced the blessing of God on one another every chance we got?

Not doing those things is squandering God's kingdom because we are not using the resources to grow it. It's bad management to put it in the terms of the parable. But God wants us to be shrewd managers, people who use all of God's legacy and estate to win others over. Our world, just like the setting of the parable, is not a fair and just place. That is why we must use every moment we have to assist others, to open their eyes to the gift before them, and to make their world a little more just, and a bit more like the kingdom of God we hear about in those other parables. As Christians, we are the managers of God's estate. I think this parable is teaching us how to manage that in this world for its maximum benefit. Amen.