

“THE TAMING OF THE SHREWD”

Six Tough Questions – 5

Luke 16:1-8 (p. 1014)

A while back we preached a sermon series on “Passages Preachers Prefer to Pass On.” How we missed this one I haven’t a clue. This has to be the strangest of all Jesus’ parables. No matter how many times you read it through, the meaning remains elusive. The crux of the problem, of course, is that the “hero” of this story, the figure Jesus holds up as somehow having something to teach “the people of the light,” is a crook, a swindler, a cheat. It makes you want to ask Jesus, “*What were you thinking?*” Yet to me it’s an oddly comforting story in that it reminds us that, just about the time we think we’ve got the meaning of scripture all figured out, that the Bible no longer holds any surprises for us, this story puts us back in our humble place and says, “*Think again.*”

This parable follows on the heels of a parable we like a whole lot better – the Prodigal Son. Although the hero in that story seems a rather despicable character at first, he ends up looking like a saint compared to this corrupt manager. But while some commentators have tried over the years to rescue Jesus from his own parable by trying to turn this shrewd con man into a really decent fellow, they have generally failed to make their case. The guy is a cheeky hustler – no two ways about it.

It turns out that a straightforward reading of this story is probably the correct one after all. A wealthy man had been alerted to the fact that the manager of his estate was mismanaging it. (It doesn’t specify how.) So he summoned the manager and told him to prepare a final report for his exit interview. Being too lazy or weak to do manual labor and too proud to beg, the man had to think fast. So he decided to cook the books in such a way that he could feather his own nest.

So he called on his boss’s wealthier clients and cut their debt load in half. And when they asked him why, he winked and said, “*Don’t ask. Just remember that I did you a favor once, okay?*” Surprisingly, when the boss found out about his working the angles he wasn’t all that angry. In fact, he commended the crook for his shrewd dealings. This parable really isn’t so far-fetched. In the often cutthroat world of business this kind of unsavory story isn’t all that uncommon.

What is uncommon about the story is what Jesus had to say about it. You would expect him to say something like, “*Verily I say unto thee, a cheat such as this will eventually find himself in a place of much weeping and gnashing of teeth.*” But he didn’t say anything of the sort. He said, in effect, “*There’s something to*

that crafty fellow's approach. Folks like this can teach you people who've seen the light some valuable lessons when it comes to dealing with the things of this world."

What was Jesus getting at in this parable? That's the first question we need to address. The second question follows right on its heels: Why couldn't Jesus have made the same point by telling a kinder, gentler story? Why did he have to present this man as having anything worth commending?

So let's go for the first question: What is the point of this parable? Clearly the point is not that theft or cheating or swindling or dishonesty is a good thing. You cannot seriously interpret this story as the Lord's blessing on shady business dealings. One theme that runs throughout the gospels is that dishonesty and discipleship don't mix. Well then, what is it about this man that is worth commending? The answer begins to come into focus when you set this parable in its larger context. This story is one of a set of parables that begins in chapter 15. (Keep in mind that when Jesus told these parables there were no chapter and verse markings. When he was telling these stories he didn't finish one parable and say, "*Now, let's begin chapter 16.*") These parables are part of a set of teaching that begins at what we call "chapter 15, verse 1."

When you look there you find that the larger issue being addressed in these stories had to do with table fellowship. Jesus was dining with all the wrong people; and the Pharisees were scandalized because he was associating with scoundrels and misfits and other low-life types. And so Jesus responded to their sneers by telling a set of three parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin and a lost son. And the point of those parables is that, worthless as they may seem to the critical observer, a single coin or one of ninety-nine sheep or an ungrateful child are worth searching and holding out hope for. And when the lost are found, when the prodigal finally returns, it's worth celebrating. So the first two parables end with rejoicing, and the story of the lost son ends with a party.

And when you transition to what we call "chapter 16," the air is still ringing with the sound of party chatter and the clink of silver on fine china and heavenly music. That is Jesus' view of God's kingdom. And if all you can see is the unworthiness and the past misdeeds of those who were lost but now are found, you will be like the sulking older brother in the parable, or like those indignant, self-righteous Pharisees who thought Jesus had lost all sense of propriety.

Jesus, on the other hand, saw those same lost souls as potential sources of heavenly rejoicing and were therefore worth going after; and he wants us to see them that same way. The potential for celebrating with these lost souls in heaven is worth the scandal of associating with them; and he calls us to do whatever we can to welcome them into fellowship before they've proven themselves "nice enough" to merit our kindness.

So we come to the second question: What is it about this scoundrel in our parable that can be instructive to those of us who have already “seen the light?” Perhaps it is just this: That shrewd man gave thought to the future and it shaped his actions in the present. He realized that monetary resources were one means to prepare for the kind of future he hoped for. So even though in his case it meant being devious, his hope of seeing his future materialize helped him see that it was worth the risk he took in currying favor with his boss’s clients.

Now what does this have to do with the church? Perhaps the point of the parable for us is this. The church has a strong vision of the future. We call it the “kingdom of God.” And Jesus has made it clear that this future vision includes the joy that is going to rock the cosmos when more people than we can imagine end up at God’s banquet, rather than the select few who are already so self-righteous they make you sick.

So if we have resources to reach the lost souls in this present life, then like that shrewd manager we need to do everything we can and take the necessary risks in order to engage those people. I’m talking about the folks whom, even today, we would not be likely to invite over for a barbecue. And yet those are the very people Jesus has commissioned us to reach. And since not much happens in this world without the help of money, we can use it for God’s purposes and glory. “*You cannot serve both God and the almighty dollar,*” Jesus goes on to say. Ah, but you can serve God by using the almighty dollar to reach out to others.

Granted, Jesus’ challenge here is a large and difficult one. The church often fails to hold a consistently clear focus on that vision of the kingdom of God. Some wise guy has suggested, “We don’t plan to fail, we fail to plan.” Well, that is undoubtedly true as far as it goes. But it is easy for the church to get so caught up in planning our next move that we fail to prepare for the coming kingdom. And believe me, God’s kingdom is coming, whether we’re prepared for it or not.

The fifth tough question that Reggie McNeal poses for the church in North America in the Twenty-first Century is this: Instead of planning for the future, how do we prepare for the future? If we were in charge of the future it would make sense for us to plan how to get there. But we’re not in charge of the future. The future is in God’s hands; and so the best thing we can be doing as a church is preparing for the future in such a way that whenever God chooses to reveal it to us, we’ll be in a frame of mind to embrace it, rather than seeing it as a frustration of we thought were the best possible plans.

We see this truth played out time and again in our daily lives. A couple gets married and they have all their plans laid out. They’re going to have two kids, a dog, an SUV and a hybrid compact, a flat screen TV, a well-stocked college fund for the kids, and a portfolio that will provide them with a comfortable retirement. They know exactly where they’re going. Then their second kid arrives, and she

has some serious birth defect, or the market goes south, or it could be any number of other unexpected crises that will throw their plans out the window.

And how will they respond? Statistically speaking, when hit with such crises the odds of a divorce skyrocket. And because they weren't prepared to deal with things they could not have planned for, they end up getting angry with God or the universe or the government or each other for messing things up. These tragedies are repeated day in and day out. That's what happens when all you do is plan, and aren't prepared.

Or look at the record in the Bible. God has repeatedly frustrated our best laid plans. Whenever we think we've got the future all sewed up and know just how to get there, God throws us a divine curve. Time and time again it's "swing and a miss." For example, those Pharisees were wagging their heads in disgust at Jesus partying with sinners. They had it all planned out and they were positive who was "in" and who was "out" – they had everyone's future all planned out. And clearly Jesus was not playing according to their game plan.

But God is in charge – we are not – and that includes the church. And the sooner we get that through our heads the more prepared we will be to follow God's lead whenever he chooses to reveal his plan for us. And incidentally, God has made it quite clear in his word that he does have plans for every one of us, and they are plans for our good and for our future. So do we stop planning altogether? Of course not. But we have no business staking our lives on our plans. And yet we have every good reason to be preparing for the future – like that sanctified schemer in Jesus' story.

I don't like Reggie McNeal's book. It makes me wrestle with stuff I'd rather not think about. Just let me make my own plans. While we're on the subject, I don't particularly like this parable, either, because it has the same effect on me. But I'm willing to wrestle with it because it was Jesus who told it, and I believe he has my best at heart.

It was, after all, that same Jesus who was prepared to embrace his Father's plan of salvation, but not without first wrestling with it in the wilderness, and then sweating blood over it in Gethsemane. And on the cross it would appear to any rational observer that God's plans had been destroyed. And I daresay nobody was planning on that. But there was an infinitely deeper mystery at work there. And not even Satan or all the angels in heaven were prepared for what God did next. Despite all the well-laid-out and executed plans to finish him off, very early in the morning on the first day of the week God said, "*Now it's my turn. Ready or not, here I come.*"

Make no mistake, Jesus is coming. Nobody knows when – nobody but God. But come he will, and each of us will have to deal directly with him. When you're confronted by the risen Lord, you will discover that it is not a thing you can plan

for. Ready or not, Easter is coming. And so, as any Boy Scout will tell you, be prepared.

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