

15 Pentecost Luke 16:1-13
Christ and Grace September 22, 2019
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“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” This is Gospel? Really Jesus? Make friends by means of dishonest wealth? There is a lot in this parable that I don’t understand. I read lots of commentaries only to find that no one else really understands it either. For one thing it is a complicated text. Scholars think the author included the parable and then tacked on some sayings he liked at the end because he did not know where else in his gospel to put them. For today, I want to focus on the strange phrase that Jesus uses – dishonest wealth – make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.

In the retail environment, products are sold at a markup. Sometimes we, as consumers, are taken advantage of by this markup, unknowingly paying \$5 for an item that costs only 20 cents to make. We do this because it’s convenient, it’s packaging is alluring, we like the commercial, our mother always used it, or it’s right there in the checkout lane and too tempting to ignore.

You may be surprised to realize just how hefty some retail markups really are. For the price of a single bottle of pure spring water, you could probably pay for 1,000 gallons of tap water. If you make coffee at home, it costs between 25 and 50 cents a cup, but that same cup may cost you almost \$2 at Starbucks. The average retail markup on a bottle of wine in a restaurant is 300 percent.

At the movie theater, people will pay popcorn premiums of 1,300 percent simply because they cannot resist that buttery aroma. That is a lot of markup, and some of it may be justified, but might there also be some dishonest wealth in there? Is the retailer, the middle man, profiting *too* much? How much is too much? How much do we really need?

In ancient Palestine, the steward was the middle man between the landholder and the merchants and tenants in the exchange of goods and services such as buying and selling grain, oil, and crops and in collecting rents. If he was able to make a profit for himself in these transactions, the master didn’t mind; in fact he expected it. As long as the master’s profits kept rolling in and the steward did not get too greedy, the master was fine with the steward making a little profit from each deal.

The steward’s position in this complex system was both privileged and vulnerable. While he had a relatively high standard of living, he was completely dependent on the goodwill of the master. Listen to what he says in verse 3, “What will I do now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.” We might assume that he is whining here, and trying to avoid honest labor. But in truth he is stating the fact that he is not physically able to compete with the peasant laborers for the hardest, most menial of jobs. He would be reduced to begging, and, in short order, would find himself living in poverty.

Understandably, the steward panics and takes an action that to us seems dishonest, even though many of us can admit that we have also been there in that place of panic. We have made a bad

decision, taken the wrong action to try to save ourselves. I'm guessing the dishonest manager had no small amount of anxiety as he was about to be fired from his position. I am also guessing that as he saw his livelihood passing away, he began to see what was truly important and what would endure. As he began to understand the importance of relationships and community, he reached out to his master's debtors. We could talk about whether his behavior was dishonest or self-preserving or a last ditch effort to avoid a job digging ditches. We could give him the benefit of the doubt and say that he messed up, realized it, and did what he could to make reparations.

In his desperation the steward called the debtors in one by one and reduced their debt. The wealth he was dealing with was dishonest wealth. Yet, in that moment of clarity, in that moment of metanoia, that place of repentance where we turn around and change our behavior, the steward did just that.

He made a conscious decision to use his ill gained wealth to help others, to create relationships with those less fortunate than himself. And in that moment, the master, and God, honored his repentance and his move from selfishness to generosity.

Even though the steward had squandered the master's wealth, he changed his behavior and helped others. He did this because he knew something of the character of his master. He knew him to be generous and forgiving. And as the steward hoped, the master's character held true. He acknowledged the steward's resourcefulness on behalf of others.

Wealth is something we are not always willing to talk about. I have to wonder if that's because we are not willing to admit just how much we cling to it, think we need it. We fear life without enough of it. Could it be that the kind of self-centered storing up of treasures for ourselves that we tend to do is actually squandering? I suspect we squander what we have been given more than we might like to admit, whether it be money, time, material possessions, a relationship, or a responsibility.

Is it possible that all wealth is really only a dishonest wealth? Dishonest in the sense that we believe that wealth itself can be our salvation? Dishonest in the sense that we claim to have attained our wealth on our own? We never truly attain wealth; rather it is all a gift from God. God has blessed us with uncountable riches. But often we squander the opportunities to make friends for ourselves, and our Master, by not using, not sharing, what is given us.

The good news is that the genuinely important things in life do not have price tags and dollar signs attached. Once we realize that, we are then free to turn... to turn our hearts and souls and minds and bodies, *as well as* our wealth and resources, to the task of serving God by serving one another. The good news is that God loves us and forgives us, over and over. God's grace is never ending and all we have to do is ask for it. God is more generous than we can ask or imagine. It's a profit margin we cannot afford to pass up.¹ Amen.

¹ Inspiration from this sermon from Alyce McKenzie
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2010/09/watermelon-rugby-with-the-shrewd-manager-lectionary-reflection-on-luke-161-13-september-192010/>