

<Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; Luke 16:1-13>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

How do we respond when faced by trying and uncertain situations in life?

Author Marilyn J. Abraham recounts a story of going on a guided hike, wherein the ranger leading the hike pointed out a dynamic that was not readily apparent to the eye. A tree, the ranger explained, when its life is threatened or stressed by the elements of fire, draught, or calamity, will twist beneath its bark to reinforce and make itself stronger. On the surface, nothing looks any different; the bark still runs in its vertical lines. But inside, and this is not known unless the tree is felled by nature or by man, inside is the evidence of what the tree has faced and endured.

How do we respond when faced by trying and uncertain situations in life? It is the kind of question which has driven people to the church for centuries, coming to worship or seeking pastoral guidance in the most difficult of times. And certainly, our Bible, and the teachings of Jesus, have much to offer, often mirroring in their stories some of the dire situations we face in our own lives. And the parable of the dishonest manager in Luke's gospel might be one such story.

Like me, you may initially think that this parable of Jesus is about business dealings, and dishonest or shady business dealings, at that. Like me, you'd be wrong. But it's hard not to see this as an endorsement of dishonest business practices at first read.

Jesus begins by introducing a manager whose boss - the rich man - is displeased with. What might any of us do in such a situation, if we were the manager in danger of losing our position? I'd like to imagine that we might first attempt to understand how we have not lived up to expectations and take steps to correct that. I'd imagine that we would work harder and endeavor more to be a good employee and to prove that we are up to the task. Certainly, that would be the good and appropriate way to proceed, yes?

So, it seems jarring to us when Jesus continues by describing what this manager does, in fact, do: he fudges the books. Not to make things look more favorable for the boss, but rather for all the clients who owe something to his boss. The manager's immediate response is to do whatever is necessary "so that people might welcome me into their homes" upon his dismissal. In short, he behaves dishonestly so that he can curry favor and then impose upon business clients to take him in.

I've mentioned before how, after I graduated seminary and before I found my first call, I imposed upon one of my closest friends to sleep on his couch in the interim...for eight months. I can tell you from experience, this is not the best, most effective, or most faithful and relational way to address such a situation. And yet, this is the plan of the manager in Jesus' parable! He cooks the books in favor of the clients, so that they might

let him crash on their couches when he doesn't have a job. And instead of denouncing this behavior, Jesus praises such behavior as shrewd!

And certainly in the eyes of the children of this age, as Jesus puts it, this dishonest manager is shrewd, and is seen, even celebrated, as such.

But does this seem a little...off, to anyone else? If so, it's because it is. And to help us to see this, it is important for us, as always, to remember the context in which Jesus is speaking and teaching.

Jesus is speaking to the disciples, teaching them of the nature of the Kingdom of God and their role in actively living out that Kingdom in this world. But Jesus is not speaking only to the disciples. On the edge of the conversation are the Pharisees and scribes - the ones whom, we know from history, have dabbled in hedging their dealings to end up in a more favorable light. Jesus' intent of centering a dishonest manager likely would have been a check on the Pharisees. Lifting up a dishonest manager and praising his business dealings as shrewd in the light of imminent dismissal resounds of parody and hyperbole.

And for as much as this might be a sly jab at the mindsets and practices of the Pharisees, there is, buried within this parable, a nugget of truth for us. In verse 8, Jesus paints the difference between “children of this age” and “children of light,” and reminds the disciples to learn the lesson of prudence and forward-looking. As one commentator writes, “if even such a cunning, unscrupulous character as this manager can be prudent, how much more ought Jesus' disciples keep an eye on the eschatological horizon long term, and live accordingly, knowing the judgment that is surely coming” (Rodney, J. Hunter, *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, volume 2*, 92).

But as I said: we may be tempted to view this morning's reading in terms of business dealings, but it is actually about something else, something much more ubiquitous and more difficult to manage: grief, and particularly, how we respond to grief.

The actions of the dishonest manager in Jesus' parable center around what he does, but the *rationale* for what he does is the attempt to address the anticipatory grief of losing his position, his status, and his security.

Grief, though amorphous and nebulous, is a much more common experience to humanity across time and space. Such a dynamic is highlighted, as well, by the pairing of this gospel reading with more of the lament poetry of Jeremiah.

As we discussed previously, it is difficult to take any portion of Jeremiah in isolation from the rest of the story of Jeremiah and the people of God, but we know that it is a story of difficult situations and uncertain futures. Walter Brueggemann offers this observation: “My impression is that one could open Jeremiah's poetry almost anywhere and find this ministry of articulated grief” (Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*). The grief of the people is palpable; the grief of God is no less evident. And grief, as we know, is a

seemingly ever-present reality and conundrum in our world and in our lives. What, then, is our response? Do we suffer alone, keeping it buried within? Or do we seek support, and share honestly, with laments, that we are going through a difficult time?

Again, the key to this question can be found in Jesus' teachings in this morning's reading. It is even found in the person of the dishonest manager - not in his shrewd, prudent, or conniving dealings, but rather in what he seeks to build up, in what he desires to see realized. And what he is striving for is so common to us, gathered here in worship, that it might be easily overlooked: the dynamic and depth of community.

How do we, as a community of faith and individually members of it, respond when facing difficult and uncertain situations in life? Where do we find our strength and support?

In 1858 a Scottish minister and missionary sailed, with his wife and infant son, to the South Pacific Ocean. Three weeks after arriving, his wife died, and then one week later so did his son. Nearly alone with his grief, he later journaled and reflected, "but for Jesus and his fellowship, I would have gone mad and died."

It is not our own efforts or devices, nor the things which we build or work for in the terms of this world, which will be our comfort and our support when facing difficult and trying situations, when facing grief in whatever way it may manifest. It is the community of faith, the depth of relationship and connection in the Spirit which can aid us in such a time, and from which we find solace in our tears, rather than shame or uncertainty.

In his parable, Jesus is teaching the disciples that, as children of light, they are to keep their focus on that which is greater, that which is more faithful, that which the world cannot define or take away: the bond and communion of faith in the Spirit of God. It is the choosing of which master to serve, and in so choosing, to lift up and proclaim the God of community and life. In this is comfort to be found; in this is life to be lived.

Twenty-seven months ago, on a Sunday in June we celebrated communion and proclaimed the Word, then you voted and we prayed, and following that we celebrated and rejoiced at the callings of God. Then, I came on my own and sat here in this sanctuary, empty and quiet. I prayed, giving thanks for the community to which we would now belong, and beseeching God's guidance and presence. I did that twenty-seven months ago, on my first Sunday with all of you, and I continue to do so: to steal away to this quiet sanctuary to think upon all of you and the community we share with each other in the Spirit of God's fellowship. This ministry is not my own, nor can any of us face this world alone and isolated. Rather, we do so together in faith, and each week we choose which master we will serve. This is truly one of the greatest gifts we give each other, and one of the most faithful acts we live out: to strengthen each other as does a tree when facing adversity, and so to endure, and more so, to thrive. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*