

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (9/22), 2019

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; 1Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

The parable of the dishonest steward has puzzled New Testament scholars for as long as there have been New Testament scholars. Being the furthest thing from a scholar of any sort, I won't tempt fate by subjecting you to a lengthy excursus into scholarly puzzling.

Perhaps, briefly, however, it is worthwhile to ask what the heck Jesus is doing by offering to his disciples this scoundrel who, caught in his own malfeasance, had figured out a manner to beat the system and save his own skin...offering this scoundrel as an example of anything remotely laudable and worthy of praise?

A dozen explanations are easily found in the great commentaries on Scripture. Everything from the possibility that the steward was actually only cutting his own exorbitant commission in half rather than his master's profit on these sales to the possibility that the steward is an exemplar of how to behave with a cool head in a really difficult situation. None seem really to provide an adequate response to the question posed regarding why Jesus would praise this seemingly unpleasant fellow for his actions and urge his disciples to behave in like manner.

I wonder if it might be possible that the answer resides in what I take to be a very real frustration expressed by Jesus in the words, "...for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their generation than the sons of light"

I think I can almost hear him sigh as he says these words. "How come those who fight on my side seem to be so short on common sense and an understanding that the things of this world are means to an end...and are to be used wisely, single-mindedly, and well? Yes, we are on the side of that which is good and honest and true...but we keep getting caught up in idealized notions that, just because we are on the side of the angels, the endeavor will go our way because we are right."

His complaint rather reminds me of what I was told was once said by one of the directors of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (for a long time, one of the Anglican Church's more effective organizations for spreading the Gospel to the ends of the earth). This particular director, I was told, once noted that, "I am puzzled why we, of the Society, seem so often to assume that, if we get a copy of the Book of Common Prayer in the hands of every hill tribesman in Asia or warrior in Africa, they will each immediately see the rightness of our cause and the truth of the Gospel."

Each of these observations reveals two truths to which, I believe, it is worth paying attention. Specifically, that, if we have a noble goal, we are wise to understand the best means to affect it...and second, we are ever so wise to seek to understand if our goal is noble.

You see, neither man condemns the things of this world. Each, in his own manner, holds them to be of tremendous value in bringing to fruition that which is, indeed, good and noble.

Money...or, in Jesus words, mammon, is not the issue. The Prayer Book...and its distribution...are not the issue. How these two are used for the creation of something good and larger than either of them is, precisely, the issue.

To return, most specifically, to Jesus' example, money is not the issue. How it is used is...and where it figures in the scheme of one's life...is. Is it an end in itself...as it was to the dishonest steward...or is it a means to something else?

We all have money...material goods. How do we view them...how do we use them?

If it, or they, become, for us, ends in themselves...something of which the amassing is the most desirable end...or something, the end of which is only to feather our own nest or, in the case of the dishonest steward, to save our own skin...then one might question if we are really onto something terribly useful to the salvation of our souls or the health and healing of a world that could actually benefit from our wise and dedicated use of these particular resources...these, in that wonderful phrase from the Christmas tale, *The Littlest Angel*, "things of the earth."

For a considerable number of weeks, we have been making our way through Luke's Gospel, and, with remarkable frequency, we have been presented by Jesus with situations that could, easily, be used simply to condemn the things of this world. Today's passage is no different...but, as with all the others, it is too simple to use it in that manner, for it asks more from us. It asks that we examine our own perceptions and, most specifically, our own priorities.

How do we use the resources that are ours, and, most importantly, how do we perceive the fact that we have them in the first place?

There is a story told that puts a rather fine point on these questions.

A man who was world-renowned as a collector of pearls was once walking down a city street and spied, in a second-hand-store window, the exact pearl he needed to finish off one particular part of his world-famous collection. He had sought it for decades...and, here, serendipitously, it was. He went into the store and said he wanted to buy the pearl. The storekeeper asked, "How much you got?" The man replied, "Well, I have \$300 in my pocket." The shopkeeper, "Good. What else you got?" The man, "A Chevy Suburban in great shape with low mileage." "Good, I'll take that too. What else you got?" The man, "Two certificates of deposit worth about \$38,000." And on it went, "A house in a really nice suburb; a beautiful wife and three great kids; ten acres in Maine overlooking Moosehead Lake"...and so on. And always, "Good...what else." Finally having offered all he possessed of worldly goods, the man looked pleadingly at the storekeeper...who said, "OK, the pearl is yours."

The man clutched the pearl to his heart and started to leave. The storekeeper said, "Hey, wait a minute. You know, that family of yours, I don't really need a family, so I give them back to you. Just remember, they are mine...and I give them to you. And a bunch of property in Maine, what will I do with that? I give it to you...just remember, it's mine and only given to you? The certificates of deposit...the house...the SUV, heck, even the \$300...I give them back to you."

The man stared dumbstruck at the shopkeeper and walked from the store holding the pearl...but what a change. He had walked in owning everything he had. He walked out owning nothing. It was all a gift to him.

How do we view what we have in this life...why do we have it...how did we come to possess it...to what end are we putting it?

The steward used it to save his own skin...I wonder if we might want to consider using it to do something about attempting to save the world around us...and our own souls in the bargain.