

I've been working on this parable for more than a week now, and I'm still not sure I've got it straight. Jesus tells a story about a rich man—a landowner, we'd assume given the way most people made and held wealth back then. This rich landowner discovers that his manager has been ripping him off. Squandering his fortune, the one the manager was supposed to be, well, managing for him. So he sends word that this manager is going to be let go—fired, sacked, who knows what else. But somehow, between when this pronouncement is made and when it is put into place, the manager figures out a way to cover his, um, bases—if not to undo what he has done, at least to figure out a plan b—one that doesn't involve hard labor, or begging or worse. So he goes to each of the debtors one by one, and, shall we say renegotiates their debts, so that he can get in good with these people once the boss man finally lets him go.

And what does the rich man do when he finds out he's been cheated—again!—by his manager? He commends him for his shrewdness. For his moxie. For his cleverness. Not exactly “well done good and faithful servant,” that we hear elsewhere in the gospels, but still he commends him. And what's more, Jesus thinks his followers should make friends with dishonest and cheating people. This is what Jesus wants us to hear as good news—that we should make friends for by means of dishonest wealth That we should be crafty—outsmarting the tricksters and out cheating the cheaters? What? This is the word of the Lord?

Over the years there have been a number of different interpretations of this parable—ways to try to make sense of something which, let's face it, seems so counter-intuitive, so directly opposed to nearly everything else Jesus has ever preached or taught. Some argue that the craftiness the crooked manager shows was his way of sticking it to “the man,” The manager is making all kinds of side deals—pulling off a sort of 1st Century version of the Big Short, betting *against* the very loans he was in charge of managing, so that when they did fail, when the borrowers did default on them, he still made out like a bandit himself.

Some have portrayed taken this a step further, as if this guy, this manager was sort of like a Robin Hood—working from the inside, out-corrupting the corruption, using the rigged system against itself, wiping out the enormous, oppressive, predatory interest rates that then as now keep the poor in utter poverty, paying far more in interest over time than they ever owed in the first place.

Others suggest maybe Jesus was being ironic—sarcastic—as he gave voice to that rich man who discovers to what great lengths his manager has gone to try to out-smart him. And once the rich man sees he has been outsmarted he does

that sort of slow clap grudging appreciation: “well played, sir. I tip my hat to you!” And, this view point goes on to say, Jesus continues this mocking tone, saying, oh yes, disciples, go and do likewise—follow the example of these children of this age, they’re much more clever than you.

Still others have argued that the punch lines at the end of the parables—where one would typically find a conclusion, a moral to the story, as if Jesus’ parables were more like Aesop’s fables, that these final lines were somehow *tacked on* but Luke or maybe from another later editor in an attempt either to make Jesus’ words more palatable, more fully of conventional wisdom, perhaps, or else to somehow rescue generations of future preachers from having to figure out just what Jesus was saying in this complex, convoluted, counter-intuitive narrative. That somehow the massive fraud perpetrated by the manager is softened by Jesus saying: Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. You cannot serve two masters. All that sounds great—but actually seems at odds with what the story itself is saying. I find myself unconvinced of any of these interpretations of the text. Even with these convoluted explanations, it just seems at odds with what Jesus says pretty much everywhere else in the gospel of Luke.

But what if our task at hand this morning, our goal in reading this parable today in worship is *NOT* to try to understand what each and every element of the story is suppose to represent. What if, instead, we followed the suggestion of Peter Hawkins, writing in *Christian Century*¹ this week, and started to think about this parable not so much as a formula we can follow for DIY discipleship and simply a description of just how different things are in the Kingdom of God that Jesus is always talking about, always pointing to in his parables and stories, always bearing witness to and even bringing into being with his very presence.

What if, in this Kingdom of God that Jesus presents, there is room enough for *both* the shrewd manager and the rich landowner—*both* the dishonest and the faithful, the cheater and the just. What if in the Kingdom of God the children of this age and the children of light both belong?

And why stop there? Why not think about what Jesus is saying about the Kingdom of God in other stories, other parables as well. That there’s room enough in the Kingdom of God for all those lost sheep, along with those who never strayed—who were never even tempted to stray. That there’s a wideness in God’s mercy enough to welcome in both the wayward, prodigal son and his steady, obedient older brother and patient, long-suffering father. What if in the kingdom of God, the rich man, Lazarus, and Father Abraham all belong

¹ Peter S. Hawkins, “Reflections on the Lectionary, September 18” in *Christian Century*, August 31, 2016, p. 21.

together. What if there is room enough for the good Samaritan, the man beat up on the Jericho road, AND the self-righteous priest and the self-important Levite. Yes, and why stop there? What if in the Kingdom of God the angels rejoice just as much at the welcome that is prepared for

- Republicans, Democrats, libertarians, socialists, *and* greens,
- That God's mercy is wide enough, deep enough and high enough to include both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and all of their supporters.
- That in the immeasurable love of God is broad enough to include both Dorothy Day and David Duke.
- That God's loving-kindness extends both to Jami Diamond and Diamond Reynolds.
- That there's grace enough for both Colin Powell and Colin Kaepernick

Friends, we can take this even a step further, since, as a congregation, we believe Jesus when he says as some of his first words in his public ministry that the Kingdom of God has come near to you, and so we proclaim that the kingdom of God has come near to us, yes, right here at Christ the King.

And so in this little corner of the Kingdom of God, this congregation boldly proclaims that we belong to God, and that we belong to one another. And built into that bold, even audacious proclamation is the belief that there is room for us all to belong right here:

- That goes for charter members and first-time visitors
- That the immeasurable love of God is broad enough to include three- or four-generation families among us, as well as single folks who come here all by themselves.
- That God's mercy is wide enough, deep enough and high enough to encompass dyed-in-the-wool Lutherans and honest-to-God spiritual seekers.
- That the wideness of God's mercy means that folks belong here who are sixth generation Swedish-Americans and first generation Liberian-Americans.

- That there's grace enough for both elders among us who might be a little shaky on their feet these days, as well as teenagers who might stumble over their words when distributing communion.
- That God's loving-kindness extends both to folks who like a time-honored liturgy passed on from generations of the faithful and those who like a in-house arrangement of a song so fresh and new and written just for us.

What if the point of a story like this one proclaimed as gospel truth among us on a Sunday Morning in New Brighton, Minnesota, was not necessarily to learn anything, but simply to acknowledge that in the midst of this difference, all this variety, all this diversity, we all belong to God and we all belong to one another.

Maybe that is what the Kingdom of God is like.

We all belong. To God and to each other.

We can't serve two masters.

Because God is God and money is not.

God is God and good health is not.

God is God and suffering is not.

God is God and my bootstrap ambition is not.

God is God and our traditions are not.

God is God and I am not.²

² This ending is based on a Facebook post by Pr. Jodi Houge, who got it from Pr. Emmy Keeger, who got it from Pr. Jill Rode, who got it from Pr. Nadia Bolz-Weber.