

“Say what?”

Who among you feels like you have a lock on the meaning of the parable we heard Jesus tell in today’s Gospel?¹ Preachers and scholars agree that this parable is difficult to understand. There are parts that just do not sound like Jesus, especially the part about making “friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.”² Jesus often turns the ways of the world upside down to make a point, but he does not tell us to do something shrewdly misleading in order to gain salvation. What is up with this parable and Jesus?

First, there is the issue that we too often view all scripture through the same lens. From an early age, we have been taught that Scripture is to be taken very seriously. While there is some truth to that, there are so many distinct types of biblical literature, and they should not all be read in the same way. For example, we do not read and understand history like you read and understand poetry. We do not read and understand letters as we read and understand a biography. Each type of biblical literature requires us to read and perceive it differently. Jesus’ parables, if taken literally, might not make sense, because they are counterintuitive. For example, welcoming home the profligate with a feast, not weeding the crops, trusting the vilified foreigner to do the right thing instead of a priest. Jesus’ parables ask us to look beyond the kingdom of this world to the Kingdom of God, where truth and love always prevail.

Another thing we do not expect when reading Holy Scripture is humor or sarcasm. Once again, we are so serious when we read the Bible that we do not perceive sarcasm when we read it. Of course, one aspect of sarcasm is the delivery. We rely on the speaker’s tone of voice and even facial expression to transmit the sarcastic tone. If I say “Oh, great,” you might think I am pleased with something. If I say “Oh, great” [with sarcastic tone and rolling of the eyes] you know I am not pleased. The writers of the Gospels did not indicate inflection.

When we hear Jesus telling this story, we ought to wonder what his tone of voice was. This is especially true because we know that Jesus was not a cynic or a fatalist. His parables have unusual twists and often call us to reconsider how the world works. But Jesus never condones immoral actions like cheating and stealing. Jesus encourages right actions, generosity, and justice for everyone. If he says, “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.”³ We know that he is not speaking literally. Indeed, the sentence itself needs some parsing.

Now, if we read this sentence the way that we read one of the Beatitudes we are going to be in real trouble. The literal meaning of this sentence is that

¹ Luke 16:1-13 NRSVUE

² Luke 16:9 NRSVUE

³ Ibid.

we are to be dishonest and that will get us into eternal safety. Thus, we need to ask ourselves, “Is there another way to hear this?”

If we are open to listening for a different tone of voice from Jesus, we could hear him being sarcastic with his audience. He might have heard people in the crowd agreeing with the dishonest manager’s actions. Perhaps they were agreeing that it was shrewd of this man to change the bills and thereby guarantee himself security after he was fired. Jesus responds sarcastically by saying how dishonesty grants a new life in their eternal homes.

With this inflection we hear Jesus telling us that being dishonest might buy you friends, but it is no guarantee of anything else. When friends are bought, they are only temporary friends. We all know that when wealth is gone “fair weather friends” disappear too. The eternal home they might welcome us into is not eternal at all. It is as fleeting as the wind. The only true eternal home is in the heart of God.

This brings us to the prophet Amos.⁴ I have long admired Amos for the courage he had to prophesy in another kingdom. He prophesied against the king and the wealthy’s treatment of the poor. In this short section of the book, we hear Amos castigate the merchants who abuse the needy and poor. He calls them out directly saying, “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.”⁵ He knows that they are not concerned with religious observances, but only with making money. They cannot wait for the end of new moon festival or the Sabbath so they can return to commerce. Additionally, Amos accuses them of cheating. He knows they cheat with underfilled bushel baskets. They also reduce the value of their money by inflating it. Leaving nothing to chance they also use false scales. They sell the dust off the floor as wheat. Anything for a buck. Despite Amos’ warnings these shady practices continue to this day, and the poor are most often the ones abused. As it is written in Ecclesiastes, “there is nothing new under the sun.”⁶

Whether the message is delivered by a fiery prophet or an itinerant carpenter and rabbi from Galilee the message remains the same. The truly abundant life is a life lived seeking God and caring for those whom human avarice has robbed of the essentials of life such as adequate food, shelter, medicine, and most importantly hope.

Let us not fall into the trap of the corrupt manager or his employer who praised his dishonesty. Let us not do as the people of ancient Israel did when they put mammon before God. All of them were fooled by the false security of wealth and power. It is only through God’s love that we can find a home eternally welcoming and life abundant without ceasing.

⁴ Amos 8:4-7 NRSVUE

⁵ Amos 8:4 NRSVUE

⁶ Ecclesiastes 1:9b NRSVUE