

“Say what you mean and mean what you say”

A few weeks ago I began a sermon by asking “Who stole my Jesus?” In that instance we were confronted with Jesus saying that he did not come to sow peace but division, to create enmity within families, generally to make things bad and not good. Now we are confronted with a Jesus that seems to be condoning, indeed encouraging, dishonesty, love of wealth, and looking out for number one at all costs. Given all that we think we know about Jesus and his ministry this does not seem right. What is going on here and why does it seem so wrong?

First of all I think the issue is our expectations. Imagine reading this passage as part of a novel. In the novel you have come to know a character named Jim. Jim is a bit of a cynic. Whenever he speaks he is usually being snarky. You never take what he says at face value, because you know that behind what he is saying is this sense of absurdity and distrust. So, to make a trite example, when Jim knocks over a glass of wine he does not fuss or curse or shout. Instead, Jim says sarcastically, “Oh, great.” You know that because Jim is Jim and not his friend Mary who would shout and fuss, that Jim does not mean that he is actually happy that he spilled the red wine on the new white tablecloth. Rather he is just as upset as Mary, but he expresses his upset through sarcasm. Mary may do this once and a while too, but that is not her norm. In fact, if Mary did say, “Oh, great” after spilling the wine we might be caught for a second wondering what she meant.

If we were with Mary in that instance and not just reading what she said in a story, we would have another clue to what she meant. That would be her tone of voice. What if Mary said the phrase like this, “Oh, great!” What might you think she meant? Perhaps that she was happy that the white tablecloth was stained with red wine, because she never liked it and now she had an excuse to get rid of it. Mary could also say it this way, “Oh, great” with a grumble as she stared daggers at the culprit. Then we would know that she is very angry and barely restraining herself. She could also say “Oh, great” in a shrill voice as she jumped up from her chair and rushed in a tizzy to the kitchen to get the carpet cleaner and stain remover. In this case she was clearly frightened that the stain might sink in, maybe because it was a gift from someone or her partner’s favorite and she had to remedy the situation if at all possible. Finally, there is how Jim would have said it, “Oh, great” with his sense of fatality and that what does one expect sooner or later some clod is going to carelessly spill red wine on my favorite tablecloth. You get the picture.

So when we hear Jesus telling this story we have to wonder what his tone of voice was at the time. 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 evil or immoral actions. Jesus does not encourage us to cheat or steal from others. Jesus encourages rights actions, generosity, transparency, 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.”¹ We know that he is not speaking literally.

Now if we read this sentence the way we read this passage and take it in the same way that we take one of the Beatitudes we are going to be in real trouble. The

¹ Luke 16:9 NRSV

literal face value meaning of this sentence is that 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. So 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. What your friends, true or bought, have to offer is only temporary. Indeed we all know that when wealth is gone “friends” are often hard to find. 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.

Cheating, lying, libeling, currying favor, name calling, and other despicable tactics may get us a temporary advantage and temporary friends. Yet, nearly every day we hear of a powerful person whose attachment to power or wealth has slipped, followed by how their so-called friends are abandoning them.

This brings us to the prophet Jeremiah, who was driven by God to prophesy against his king and the people of Judah and especially Jerusalem. There is no sarcasm in Jeremiah’s voice. It is a clear and passionate voice of lament. He had warned the people over and over again that their treatment of the poor and their disregard for YHWH would spell their doom, and now it has. The Babylonians have destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, God’s home. He weeps for them, because like the dishonest manager in Jesus’ parable, they put their trust not in God but in things that are not permanent. The key sentence in this lament that helps us understand it all, (even out of context of the foregoing chapters) is the parenthetical statement spoken by God “(‘Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?’).” God lets us know through Jeremiah, that the images and idols of false gods provoked God to allow the Babylonian destruction. Those false gods, whether idols of other peoples, or wealth, greed and power that we make into gods, are not eternal. In the long haul they will fail.

Whether the message is delivered by a despised prophet or an itinerant carpenter and rabbi from Galilee or the latest social justice advocate, the message is the same. The real 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 and most importantly hope.

Let us not fall into the trap of the corrupt manager or the people of ancient Jerusalem who put false idols before the one true God, or the rich man who fired his steward, only to praise his shrewdness and dishonesty, or the steward who put his faith in purchased friends. All of them were fooled by the false security of wealth and power. Only in God’s love can we truly find a home eternally welcoming and life abundant without ceasing.