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Luke 16:1-13

Have you ever experienced financial uncertainty? Have you ever lived paycheck to paycheck? I was a stay at home mom for years, a very vulnerable role. When my first husband lost his corporate job every 2 or 3 years, I felt like the earth fell away from under my feet.

In 2008 during the housing crisis, I watched neighbors pack up and move away because their houses had been foreclosed upon. During that season, I remember trembling in bed at night, afraid that we would be next. The 2008 crisis was created through the unjust business practices of banks. Over 6 million American households lost their homes.

Civic life seems extraordinarily unnerving right now, but it has been before. (Cuban middle crisis story.)

In today's gospel, the steward of a rich man's accounts is in some trouble. He fears for his wellbeing, as we all fear when we face uncertainty.

Our steward is most likely the manager for a large agricultural estate. We can surmise his position has been comfortable, as his response to its loss is, "I can't dig for a living." This tells us he has earned his living through brains not brawn.

The steward goes about adjusting the bills of tenant farmers on debts for jugs of oil and containers of wheat. A closer look at context can help us understand the nuances of the so-called "dishonest" steward's work.

He may be eliminating interest, compelled by Deuteronomy 23:19, “You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest.” Or the steward may have been reducing his own commission. With those adjustments to their debts, he makes the books look better for his boss, and he possibly is able to keep a cut for himself.

And, the cherry on top— he ingratiates himself with the farmers, who he hopes will help him later, maybe offer him their guest room if he no longer has the means to live on his own.

Plain and simple, he cooked the books. We think, from our “law and order” perspective, “Straight to jail.” But somehow, this is not the parable’s conclusion.

In Verse 8 we read, “And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.” The master praises his shrewd business practice, which raises the master in the farmers’ esteem and feathers the nest of the steward as well.

Verse 9 reads, “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.” What do we make of this seemingly immoral advice?

The parables are not always straightforward messages of right and wrong representing actual people, but they nevertheless contain within them messages congruent with Jesus’ mission. The parables ask listeners to think about morality instead of dictating it.

Today’s parable is a difficult passage. Some scholars argue the social context of it has been lost in antiquity and cannot be interpreted in our current day. Scholar Andrew McGowan gives it a try.

Rebranding the passage as “The Steward of Injustice,” McGowan writes, “Jesus urges the use of wealth—which he seems to regard, in the reality of unequal economic exchange, as

inherently ‘unjust’—for purposes that are good in themselves, because they are centered on human need and not accumulation”.¹

Jesus cares about the unjust amassing of wealth by the few at the expense of the many. (Side note: the definition of “political” is relating to the government or public affairs of a country. This parable is political.)

In the first century, loans on consumer goods such as oil, grain, salt or wine, could be charged from 50 - 100% interest, an untenable amount.² Our steward corrects this injustice.

Today’s parable is similar to a common ethical dilemma posited for students. The question is, “Is it wrong for a man to steal a loaf of bread to feed his children?”

Take a moment to decide where you land on this. The possible answers cover the spectrum from, “Stealing is illegal and immoral so it’s wrong,” to “It is a father’s responsibility to feed his children so it’s not wrong” to “The baker also has to make a living and also has children to feed so stealing bread from him is wrong.” Do any of these reflect your perspective?

Another answer, which I think is representative of today’s parable is, “A society which allows children to starve is inherently immoral”. If a society is disordered, should survival be illegal? Is surviving in unjust circumstances immoral?

Modern examples come to mind. Is a society just if a catastrophic illness can deplete a person’s life savings? If it becomes illegal to be an immigrant, or person of color or a trans person or homeless or in a same-sex marriage, do we cease to advocate for such people? Do we cease to acknowledge their humanity? If speaking truth to power becomes illegal, do we stop speaking?

¹ Andrew McGowan, “Andrews Version” https://open.substack.com/pub/abmcg/p/a-steward-of-injustice?r=13mi9&utm_medium=ios)

² Anchor Bible Commentary.

If it becomes illegal to preach the Gospel, do preachers still preach? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German Lutheran pastor and anti-fascist in Nazi Germany wrote, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

Perhaps this is why the dishonest steward was praised, because he drove a spoke into the wheel of injustice. Go and do likewise.