

The Rev. Steve Best St.
Thomas Church Pent. 15C;
9.22.19 Amos 8:4-7; 1
Tim. 2:1-7; Lk. 16:1-13

More Than What We Can See

How many of you agree with me that Jesus' parables are often very challenging? This Sunday's Parable of the Dishonest Manager could very well be among the very hardest to understand. How in the world could Jesus use a very dishonest money manager, fired because of his incompetence and wastefulness, to illustrate an important spiritual principle about seizing the moment? Isn't there something in the Ten Commandments about not stealing, lying, and manipulating others to get your own way? And yet God remains capable of surprising us when we are so certain that some sketchy person or moral dilemma in our lives can bring no good. Is it possible that sometimes the ends do justify the means?

Interestingly, Jesus in several other places in the Gospels drew object lessons from the actions of—well let's say—less than perfect characters such as in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins—remember those selfish wise virgins who wouldn't share their lamp oil with those that were unprepared? Or how about the parable of the unrighteous judge who didn't fear God or anyone else for that matter. He only very reluctantly agrees to help a widow in the city who needs vindication from her accusers. He is only helpful because she is getting on his nerves from her continually asking for help. God seems to be saying that he can enter the contradictions, paradoxes, and our human lives and bring something good, holy, and sometimes inspirational out of it.

We always have the capacity to be more than what we appear to be. And God can do far more than what we think he can do. One of best illustrations of this from my own life was my graduation from Princeton Theological Seminary. I will never forget the self-righteous remark I made on the eve of my graduation when I learned that one of the principal signers of my diploma was the late Sir John Templeton—arguably one of the most successful mutual fund managers of the 20th century.

I remember very cynically saying to a classmate, "How ironic that we would have one of the most celebrated capitalists in the world sign off on our theological education." To which my more worldly-wise classmate responded, "Steve, have

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you ever wondered why our tuition is considerably less than comparable theological seminaries and divinity schools?" I sheepishly answered, "Well, no, I don't know why." My classmate retorted, "Well, I can tell you why. Since John Templeton became the chair of the board of the seminary, the endowment has tripled. This has allowed the seminary to grant a 50 percent reduction in tuition fees to every student who attends here."

This information stopped me in my self-righteous tracks, and you could hear the air deflate from my ego. I could barely afford to go to seminary as it was and I knew that the chances of paying off large loans on a minister's salary would be very challenging, if not impossible. This capitalist and devout Presbyterian by the name of John Templeton—and many others as it turned out-- has made my ministry possible. In fact, there is a chance that I might not be here before you this morning if there had not been such a strong legacy of giving both in the seminary community but the wider church—including my home parish which paid the tuition for three years so I could complete my degree.

This timely stewardship Parable of the Dishonest Manager helps us see how we are to navigate and invest our resources in a shadowy world in which evil is sometimes disguised as good and good is sometimes disguised as evil. It is hard to see what our spiritual legacy could and will be. In the case of John Templeton, he walked the fine grey line between being a man of the world and a man of Christ.

Coming from a family background of modest means, John Templeton financed a portion of his University Education at Yale by playing poker. Known throughout his life as the great contrarian, doing things that seemed to be the opposite of what was seen as common sense, he launched what would become his several billion-dollar empire. He began by buying shares of each New York Stock Exchange listed company for a dollar a share just after the 1929 stock market crash—at a time when many thought the world economy might come to an end. Was he a predator preying on distressed companies and people's misfortunes or an extremely wise and gifted money investor who like the Dishonest Manager in today's gospel parable shrewdly seizes the moment—when no one else had the guts-- imagining something greater than what everyone else could see?

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Later Templeton went on to become one of the most generous philanthropists in history giving away over a billion dollars to a variety of causes—many of them religious—such as the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion whose first recipient was Mother Theresa. But again, Templeton’s life was surrounded with questions about his character and motives when in 1968 he renounced his American citizenship and became a subject of the UK to avoid paying 100 million in taxes to the country (that is, the United States) whose war efforts had made him a very wealthy man.

In the parable of the dishonest manager we see a morally challenged steward about to be dismissed from his job but is savvy enough to see into the future and to seize an opportunity. He does so by cutting deals with those who owe his master money knowing that these debtors will be obligated to welcome him into their homes after he is dismissed from his employment. Very clever in deed!

He used the existing economic system to his advantage—that is to survive. But to spiritually thrive--I believe that Jesus is not saying that we should be dishonest or cheat people as a matter of course but that whatever our motives might be he is able to redeem them for a higher purpose. I believe that Jesus is saying that we should do what is at our disposal to prepare for what is truly lasting and enter the door to our eternal homes.

Jesus calls us to embrace the step by step journey in which we eventually disentangle our loyalty to God from unhealthy attachments to wealth of this world that is transitory, leaves us empty, and without a spiritual legacy. While we are living in this world, we often find ourselves serving two masters—but in the end—God wins for he can use even unrighteous mammon (so-called dirty money) and not yet fully redeemed resource managers (I believe that’s all of us folks) for his eternal purposes.

In the footsteps of the late John Templeton may we all claim our successes in the earthly realm so that we might turn toward the heavenly realm where our legacies are turned into lasting riches. We always have the capacity to be more than what we appear to be. And God can do far more than what we think he can do. I would like to end with a quote from John Templeton, “Happiness comes from spiritual wealth, not material wealth...Happiness comes from giving, not

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getting. If we try hard to bring happiness to others, we cannot stop it from coming to us also. To get joy, we must give it, and to keep joy, we must scatter it." Amen.