

Year C, September 22, 2019
15 Pentecost (Proper 20)
Christ Church, Mexia

A Nun grading papers at a Catholic elementary school provided the following humorous examples of answers to a test on the Old and New Testaments:

"Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree."

"Noah's wife was Joan of Ark."

"Lot's wife was a pillar of salt during the day, but a ball of fire during the night."

"The seventh commandment is thou shalt not admit adultery." (implication that commission is OK maybe, which could be related to the following answer)

"Christians have only one spouse. This is called monotony."

Sometimes when reading scripture, especially in this part of Luke, I often find myself wondering if I have any better grasp than those kids I just quoted. Why was a certain passage written, and can it really be true? What does it mean for me? For example, recalling today's reading from Luke, did Jesus really say, "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?" It is written there in black and white. But that just doesn't sound like Jesus, if I take it literally. Is he suggesting that I can buy my way into heaven?

And there are a few other puzzling things about the lesson today. After the manager was fired and had the clients reduce the quantities on their bills so that it looked like they owed his master less, the owner apparently discovers this deception and commends the manager for acting shrewdly!! What? Does Jesus mean that God admires cheating? It certainly goes against what I was taught/led to believe in the rest of the Bible.

This passage continues to baffle both Christian scholars and preachers. Maybe there is something we don't understand, something that was left out of the story. For example, how was the manager paid for his work? Did he receive wages, or did he get a percentage of the goods? If it was the latter, and he simply asked the clients to reduce the bills by the amount of his

commission or his cut, then it becomes a different story, and we can understand how the master would commend him for foregoing his share in order to gain favor with the clients who would be obligated to him in the future, and as a way for him to make amends for his past embezzlements. That does seem shrewd and it is in keeping with our morality, most of which we discern from the Bible. The problem is, however, that we don't know if that was the way he was paid, and it would seem to be a rather large percentage, 50% in regard to the jugs of olive oil and 20% with regard to the containers of wheat. And, if this was the case, why would Jesus refer to it as "dishonest" wealth in the quote I read earlier?

Another way to interpret the story is to consider that maybe the master of the steward was charging interest. Jews were forbidden to lend money with interest. Therefore, they would sometimes try to get around this by having payment made in other forms, e.g., oil or grain. If the steward was eliminating the unjust "interest" then he would certainly curry favor with the debtors and the master couldn't complain without admitting his guilt. That would be shrewd. However, if we want to put God in the place of the master in the story, what does that say about God?

The real problem, however, may be our temptation to make this parable about money, wealth and doing business, when it is likely about something different. N.T. Wright has an alternative explanation that appeals to me. To think of a master-steward relationship in the first century is to have God as the master and Israel as the steward. And Israel had problems at times as we heard in the reading from Jeremiah a few minutes ago. Israel isn't doing so well during the time of Christ either. In fact, Jesus foretells the fall of the Temple that is coming. Now consider that Pharisees are in the audience when Jesus is telling this parable. Their answer to the problems was to make enforcement of the "laws" even harsher in order to make Israel more holy. So, they are excluding the other people Jesus was reaching out to. Their approach is to circle the wagons and up the ante, so to speak. What Jesus would be suggesting then is that this is the wrong approach – they should be reaching out more, including more, expanding the base. That is what the shrewd people, wise in the ways of the world, would do. Israel could better prepare to cope with the problems that are coming by being less exclusive and becoming more inclusive. They would be better positioned by having more people than fewer people.

There is a story told by Charles Swindoll: "An old, rich man with a cranky, miserable attitude visited a rabbi who lived a simple life. They weren't together very long before the rabbi got a wonderful idea on how to illustrate to the man that his cranky attitude was wrong. He took him by the hand and led him over to his window and he said, 'Now look out the window and

tell me what you see.' As the man stood there, he said, 'Well, I see some men and some women and I see a few children.' 'Fine.' The rabbi then took him by the hand and led him across the room to a mirror. 'Now, look and tell me what you see.' The man frowned and said, 'Well, obviously I see myself.' 'Interesting,' the rabbi replied. 'In the window there is glass, in the mirror there is glass, but the glass of the mirror is covered with a little bit of silver. And no sooner is the silver added than you cease to see others, only yourself.'

As a church then, I think the message for today, based on the parable of Jesus, is: are we looking in a mirror or through a window?

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit. Amen.