The Dishonest Steward

Some of the Gospels lately have been anything but straightforward. They really make us work at it to get the point. But this one takes the cake! The master commended that dishonest steward? What is that all about? This can be a confusing parable, no two ways about it!

Miss the last three words of the punchline, which is easy enough to do, and it really makes no sense. But catch those last three words: The master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. Once we recognize how key those three words are … that the steward was commended FOR ACTING PRUDENTLY, we are on the way to making sense of the parable.

We can really untangle the parable by beginning with two simple questions. What was prudent? What wasn’t? What did the steward do wrong, and what did he do right? Clearly he wasn’t prudent in managing the owner’s property. If he had been, we wouldn’t have a story here! So he didn’t handle his responsibilities well initially.

I’ll just tell you there are tons of different ways folks have handled his changing the amount of the debts others owed the master, like saying he was reducing by his commission, but trust me, taking the time for that background isn’t really necessary. Let’s put that changing amounts owed in the column of what he did wrong, or at least what is not commendable in itself.

So what did he do right, and prudently? First and perhaps foremost, he recognized he was in a crisis. He was in trouble, and needed to take action or he would be in a bad place. Next, realizing he was in trouble, he thought it through, came up with a strategy, and committed himself to acting on it quickly. Third, he wasn’t focused on the short term problem, being out of work today. He knew that he needed to worry about the future, long after the debts were ancient history. Finally, he saw money, not as an end in itself, but as a way to strengthen friendships so his master’s debtors would help him out in the future. Not a bad list of things he did right, once he got called up short!

So why does it have to be a parable about a dishonest steward? Well, first off, if he was an honest steward, his job wouldn’t have been in jeopardy, he wouldn’t have needed to recognize that, and wouldn’t have needed to take any new course of action, prudent or not. Being a dishonest steward sets up the parable.

But I suppose there is another reason the parable is set up this way. One purpose of parables is to catch people off guard. In other words, when we hear the parable, we can think, “O, this is an interesting story about how the other half live.” But then before we know it, by the time the parable is through, we discover the parable was NOT about how the other half live. With any luck, we realize the parable was to help us see ourselves in the clear light of day.

Chapter 15 in Luke begins by telling us that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners, and the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about it. A bit of self-righteous judgement going on. At the end of these parables, Luke tells us the Pharisees were lovers of money, and ridiculed Jesus for these teachings.
Jesus was teaching repentance. Some were honest enough to realize they needed to repent, but others were unwilling to accept they were doing anything wrong. So who was facing a crisis? The Pharisees and scribes, among others. Here the Savior was teaching them. They had to decide whether to accept his teaching, or keep their minds closed.

But then what about us? Do we need to hear this parable? Any crisis we should be thinking about?

Now for those who are self-righteous, it can still be a total affront that Jesus expects good upright folks to learn from a dishonest steward. But for those who have some failures to admit, it isn’t nearly so troubling. Maybe we are more like the steward than we think. Humble folks can learn from anyone.

If we can be humble enough to realize that at times we have squandered opportunities God has given us, things God has entrusted to our care, we can learn from the dishonest steward. We just need to recognize that we haven’t been the greatest stewards with the gift of faith, the gift of mercy, the gift of a community and other relationships, the gift of the planet we share.

And what would help us grow into better stewards? A living relationship with Christ! The kind of relationship Pope Francis continually encourages; the kind of relationship ChristLife, the program Fr. Peter wrote about on the front of the bulletin helps us to build.

I think each of the prudent things the steward did apply to us. We need to recognize that alone we are in deep trouble. We need Christ, we need community, we need believing friends. We also would do well to look at the long term, not just today and tomorrow. Am I on a path of growing in my faith that will sustain me long into the future? When I really need a loving Savior the most, where will I stand? Will I take action to respond to Christ’s invitation into just such a relationship?

If the steward decided “I’ll sort this all out after I leave the job”, he would have been in deep trouble. It would be too late. Christ is clearly encouraging us to recognize: he is visiting us now, today is the opportunity. Take a step closer to him.

What about that direct advice from Jesus: Make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.?

In the context of Luke’s whole Gospel, the point is not that everyone’s wealth is dishonest. It is an encouragement of almsgiving, rather than letting wealth become a dirty idol.

And the last bit of this Gospel: Who will we choose to love? God, or what we own? In Jesus’ words: We cannot serve both God and mammon. Luke Timothy Johnson, in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke summarizes that point very well. “....the worship of possessions and a clinging to them as ultimate means separation from God.” “Giving away possessions in almsgiving secures a place with God.”

To wrap up, I hope and pray we can all echo Joshua, a great voice from the Old Testament. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.