

USE THEM NOW

Luke 16:1-13

Intro

There is no way around it: the parable that we are about to hear is flat out confusing. It's one of those stories as a preacher that you give an initial look at and say to yourself, "lets see if there is something a little easier to figure out."

And, candidly, that is exactly what I did.

But for some reason I gave it a second and then a third look and eventually decided that the Holy Spirit wasn't bringing me back to this passage for no reason at all. It will be up to you to decide if the reason that I was able to uncover to talk about this passage was ultimately worth it.

The passage picks up right where we left off last week with our Gospel reading. Jesus has just finished telling the Pharisees and the scribes his third story that relates to how God is trying to save those who have gone astray by going out and searching for them and, as the case may be, forgiving them.

Jesus then turns his attention to his disciples, with the religious elite still listening in. He describes to his chosen twelve the story of a dishonest employee who has been skimming money off the top of his employer's profit for years. Finally the thief is caught by his boss and told that he is going to be fired. Knowing that he is destined to end up on the streets and unable to support himself, he calls up his boss's clients and cuts all of their debts to the employer in half hoping that, in turn, the clients would take him in his impending time of need. The boss finds out what he is doing and instead of being angry, as we would rightly expect, praises him for being clever at how he has made his way through this difficult situation.

Let me say that once more: the boss praises his to be fired employee for stabbing him in the back,...again.

As I said, it is no wonder that this parable causes many people to become completely confused and almost everyone to wonder at what Jesus was actually trying to say to us.

Therefore, I would like you to listen to this passage with the following question in mind: when it comes to the blessings that God has bestowed us with, how are they to be used? Should we go out of our way to put them to use, or do we sit back and wait until our hand is forced until we draw upon them? The scripture reads this way.

Luke 16:1-13

16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ² So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' ³ Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their

homes.’⁵ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’⁶ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’⁷ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.⁹ 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.

¹⁰ “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.¹¹ If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?¹² And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?¹³ No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

“Use Them Now”

As you hear this passage, it is very tempting to skip over the first 9 verses and focus on the final four verses where we are given the theological raw meat that is real easy to remember and is extremely quotable. I am sure that there have even been several among us today, as well as the theologians who we read or listen to on a regular basis, who have said things like, “No slave can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth”, and “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much.”

However, if we act as if Jesus made these statements in a vacuum, we are kidding ourselves and inappropriately using the Word of God. These statements were offered, at least as we have them here in Luke, as a postscript to a point that was already made in the parable. It is for this reason that we need to look at all of what Jesus said, and that means diving into a story that is incredibly hard to swallow.

On its surface, it’s impossible to believe that what Jesus has described to his disciples as a positive, is actually something that is good. How could Jesus ever describe what this recently fired employee did in going out and stealing from his employer (again) as something that should be seen in a positive light? Jesus has told us to love our neighbor as ourselves and what we have here certainly doesn’t look like any kind of love that we would want to be shared with us.

So, what do we do?

Well, the first thing is to look at whom Jesus is telling this story to. The parable is for the disciples, the chosen twelve who will soon, although they don’t know it yet, be heading out into the world to proclaim the truth that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

here is a popular and widely held sentiment that God can work through all things; subtext: whether it be a person or a situation, God is able to work through the bad just as easily as He is to work through the good. We talked about that last week in Paul’s letter to Timothy.

Although this belief can be overused and highly abused, I believe that it is able to come into play in this parable. Jesus is using a negative example and proclaiming that there is a positive that can be derived and that positive can and should be put to use by the disciples as they continue on their path of following him. We know that Jesus feels that the dishonest manager is considered negative because of

what the man from Nazareth says immediately after the parable is finished. He says, “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.”

There is a differentiation between those who are considered the children of light (the disciples) and the children of this age (the dishonest manager) and once this distinction is drawn it becomes obvious that Jesus is not asking the disciples to become the dishonest manager where they are going out and elevating their own name by putting money in their own purses.

Instead, he is asking them to put their worldly knowledge to use so that the name of God is glorified. I believe that’s what verse 9 means when Jesus tells his disciples, “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.”

Jesus recognizes that the disciples are living in a sinful world, but instead of telling them, and us here today, to separate ourselves from the world, or coalesce to the sinfulness that does exist, we are instead called to move, as beacons of light, through the darkness that we do see, living out the lives that we are called to lead, using all of the gifts that we have so that the name of God is lifted up.

With all that out on the table for the disciples to deal with, Jesus then pounds the point home with the quotables in the next 4 verses. “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No one can serve two masters; for they will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

Basically, go out into the world and use the gifts. Now sometimes that means money that you have been blessed with. Use them, but not for yourself, but instead so that the glory of God is raised.

Now over the past few weeks we have talked about using the gifts that we have been blessed with; the opportunities that have been placed before us.

This passage encourages us to take more of a financial stewardship angle with that thought.

Now it would be real easy to approach that thought from the perspective of, ‘those folks who are really wealthy...they need to do a better job of using that wealth to care for the rest of society.’

We have certainly heard that sentiment from certain political persuasions this presidential election cycle.

But when we do that, we end up removing ourselves from the perspective that has been created, and that is not something that we should do.

What Jesus is saying to all those who will listen is that we need to use all the gifts that we have so that the name of the Lord might be highlighted or at the very least elevated. Resources, however they may be articulated, are not to be used to push our name, our reputation. It needs to be about God.

Look, I get it: in many corners of the Christian world, there is a tendency to view money as purely a negative.

But there is a flip side to money and it is discovered when you are able to put your money, your intelligence, and your skills to work for God instead of self. For when this is done, positive is able to be found in what is talked of, so very often, as negative because the name of God has been lifted up and the embrace of His love has been experienced in a new way. This is absolutely part of what Jesus called his disciples to do in the parable this morning.

So, what have you been blessed with, whether it be financially or in terms of mental and physical skills? How are you putting them to use? There seem to be three responses.

1. You are either isolating yourself from the world and not putting God's blessings to use (the ostrich putting its head in the sand mentality).
2. You are taking the blessings of the Almighty and using them in such a way that you are elevated in the eyes of the "children of this age" (you become the dishonest manager).
- Or 3. You are putting those gifts to use, albeit in a sinful world, so that the name of God is glorified (you are one of the children of light).

Who are we going to be? How are we going to live?

Now what I am not saying is any variation of, 'the end of the world is coming: spend it all!'

Nope.

What I am saying is that there too many days when the use of our blessings, our financial resources, end up firmly ensconced in one of the first two descriptions that I put out there.

Yes, we need to take care of our facilities, but that care needs to be done so that ministries of compassion and care are able to flow out from these walls. I get that it can feel like a difficult balance, but it's a balancing act that is absolutely necessary.

God's name needs to be championed. God's love needs to be shared. That takes place when the flock follows the shepherd.

We had friends visit us from up New York way yesterday and we ventured down New Hope/Lambertville way to enjoy the afternoon. As we were crossing back over the bridge into Lambertville, one of us floated the idea of getting ice cream.

Shockingly, there was not a lot of resistance to that idea (ha!).

The ice cream shop that is just up the street is up a few steps so we parked Austin right by one of the two benches that are right outside the shop and I sat down beside him. Beside us sat an elderly woman with a cart in front of her that, I am guessing, held most of her worldly possessions. She looked at Austin, back at me, back at Austin and back to me. Then she said 'hello'.

I totally understand that this story is outside of the bounds of being a good financial steward, but I hope that we are able to realize and remember that despite the fact that she had little to no money, she still used a gift that she had in her possession: her voice.

And the reason that I bring her up in this context is because as we chatted, she started talking about church, about God. They were so much a part of her being that they necessarily made an appearance even sitting there on a bench outside of an ice cream shop talking to a stranger. She used what she had and she didn't wait. She used her gifts...now.

What we are able to hear in the parable this morning is that God wants us to use the spiritual but also intellectual and monetary gifts that we have been blessed with so that the name of God is glorified. Respond to the challenge that is put forth in this story, and discover all of the opportunities to praise God that can be discovered.

Use them; use them now!

After Sermon Prayer

God, You have blessed us in so many ways: intellectually, emotionally, monetarily. Lord, we pray for the guidance that we do need in this sinful world to put all of these gifts to use, not so that we are able to receive any kind of personal glory, but so that Your name is glorified and known throughout the creation. God, help us to put all of the gifts that You have blessed us with, to use. In Jesus' name we do pray. Amen.