

07, Sep 23, Something amiss in the household of God!

- Luke 16: 1- 13
- In this scripture there is something amiss – in a rich man’s household. It’s a difficult scripture- The heading in our pew bible is “the dishonest manager”. It is difficult because the so-called “dishonest manager” is in the end not punished, as we might expect, but praised by his boss.
- so what will help us understand this teaching? We need to look at the “form” of writing, the context, the audience, the culture of the day, clues from the text, original language- alternative translations!
- The form of writing is a PARABLE – This is not an illustration of what we’re to do- it’s a story that makes a point. A single point. We should not imagine, for example, that the story we’re about to hear urges us to be dishonest. It’s not dishonesty that the manager is praised for, but rather his shrewdness in securing his future.
- It’s very important who the audience is: This parable is directed to the disciples, the followers of Jesus, spiritual people, those whom Jesus calls children of light.
- There is a teaching that follows, which is actually a commentary on the parable: This tells us that this parable concerns the use of money. - how children of light are to use money- to secure our spiritual future.
- Checking out the context in the scripture is helpful: It’s one of four parables: a shepherd seeks and finds a lost sheep; a woman seeks and finds a lost coin, a father receives back his prodigal son, and today’s scripture, a rich man praises his manager who’s done some shady dealing.
- In each case, The shepherd, the woman, the father and the rich man is God; and the lost sheep, the lost coin, the errant son, the errant manager, are us. The story is dressed up in different clothes, but is the same story, the restoration of what is lost.
- A brief word about the dishonesty issue- we don’t know for sure that the steward was dishonest - there are merely allegations. The Gk word for squandered CAN imply dishonesty but it can also simply mean wasteful, as in the story of the prodigal son.
- Either way, the manager’s actions are bringing dishonour to his employer, and in the Middle East honour is more important than honesty. What is being restored in this story is the rich man’s honour.

“Something amiss in household of God”

I love my brother dearly, but he was born without an embarrassment gene. Nothing embarrasses him. I think I got his share of that gene.

In our travels together, a couple of summers ago, we visited the Hermitage museum in St Petersburg. My brother is not interested in art, so he planned to sit in the cafeteria with a book, while my sister in law and I went through the galleries. I should explain about our money situation: Our tour had paid our entrance fee, but WE had no cash- we’d not yet had a chance to get any rubles.

Afterwards, when we all met outside, my sister-in law shared her frustration at not being able to purchase a poster of a painting she adored. “Oh,” says, my brother, “you had a cell phone- you should have called me – I could have given you money.”

A very pregnant silence. “I didn’t know you had money,” she said- “why didn’t you give me some in the morning?” (the conversation started to get quite heated). “I didn’t have it in the morning. I got it in the museum.” “In the museum?” “Yes, in the museum You could have got it in the museum.” “Well,” she said, “next time I’m in a museum, I’ll ask for a bank.”

“There’s no bank in the museum, you don’t need a bank.” “Well how did you get money?” “Anyone can get money in a museum. – you can get money”... “Well how did you get money?”

So he says, “You reach into your pocket, you take out some dollars (this is in this very elegant museum...)and you hold it up over your head and ask, does anyone want dollars...?”

Now this wasn’t illegal, as far as I knew, but for sure, if we’d been with him, we would have disowned him on the spot.-

Rather like the rich man in today’s scripture, whose manager was causing him embarrassment. We sense that he’s fond of his manager, “What’s this that I hear about you-?” concern in his voice, disappointment.

But much as he is fond of his manager, he is more fond of his reputation. He wants to rid himself of the embarrassment- as quickly as possible. So he asks for an immediate presentation of accounts – presumably so that he can justify the dismissal.

For accounting we need some written records. Documents. The manager didn’t seem to have any at hand- Why not? Was he dishonest? Or incompetent?

Or simply illiterate? Whatever, he had to produce some documents very quickly. Cleverly, he produces them in the debtor's own hand writing.

We can only speculate concerning the reduced amounts shown in the documents.

Were these debtors perhaps his accusers? And the reduction represented some illegal charge that he had added on? That had maybe caused discontent? Or was it the differential between what he charged one person and another that caused the discontent? We don't know.

What we do know is that the reduced amounts thoroughly satisfy everyone. - The rich man looks good, - he's clearly been generous and fair in his prices. Documents to prove it. The debtors are more than happy. The manager's made friends for life – he will always be welcome in their homes. His future is secure. A happy ending.

And Jesus says that, as the children of light, we can do the same. WE can use unrighteous money to secure for ourselves a heavenly future.

Why does Jesus describe money as unrighteous? Not because he wants us to shun money and its use, but because of the ways it's sometimes gained and sometimes spent- the money we use is not pure.

It seems however that God is not a purist. Despite the world's impurity, God loves this world, SO much that God actually becomes PART of the world, in the human being Jesus. God ENGAGES the world, to turn it all to God's intentions and purposes. And God calls us to do the same. To engage the world.

Living spiritual lives does not mean turning our backs on wealth; it means pleasing God with how we use our wealth.

As children of light, as the household of God, we might ask ourselves today, "Do we please God with the use of our money? Is God honoured through how we use our wealth? Do we show God's generosity and magnanimity? Or might we be a cause of embarrassment?"

I came across a wonderful sermon by John Wesley based on this scripture. Wesley was the 18th century preacher who founded Methodism, one of the roots of our United Church. In this sermon, he is very plain in his teaching about our use of money.

He says the following: We are to earn all we can; we're to save all we can; and we're to give away all we can.

He qualifies our earning all we can, by saying that it should never be at the expense of health or life- or of our souls. We should never acquire money by cheating or exploitation- that would be to lose our souls.

And likewise we never should acquire money at the expense of our health or the health of someone else. HE spoke of working with lead or dye. Today we might speak of environmental hazards, greenhouse gases, and work-o-holic patterns of behaviour.

I suspect John Wesley would be a supporter of a minimum living wage, since poverty makes people sick- when people cannot eat well and have to work two or three jobs to make ends meet, their health suffers.

So, Wesley encourages us to make as much money as we possibly can, but not at the expense of health or soul.

And then he says we should SAVE all we can. By this he means we shouldn't squander our money- on frivolities, on things that become part of a lifestyle, that sucks us in and keeps us on a treadmill to maintain it, things that never satisfy, but feed our desire for more and more- today we would use the word, addiction.

We live in a world today that encourages us to create these false needs.

I've always been so impressed by the story of Elizabeth Fry and her sister, who worked with women in prison, and did so much to bring about prison reforms. It wasn't that they had a lot of money at their disposal, or time – they had little money and large families needing their care.

But they were able to do this work because of their deliberate decision to dress and to groom simply, and so they freed up personal time and money to be able to serve in the world, beyond their own family.

Which brings us to Wesley's third point: we're to give away as much as we can. To do as much good for others as we can.

A Christian life doesn't mean giving everything away- our first responsibility is to ourselves and our family- to see that our own family has the basics, and after that are we to look to the larger good that we can do with our money.

Like the instructions on an aeroplane- we're to fix our own oxygen masks in place before trying to assist someone else.

But, once we have the basics, our responsibility as children of light is to do as much good as we can with the rest of our money. Our church mission statement says we are to bring Christ's healing grace to a hurting world-

This MAY be through what we understand to be spiritual means- through kindness, forgiveness, faith sharing, but concretely, people live in bodies, and every person has monetary and bodily needs- and much of the healing we bring requires money to make it happen.

Listen to these words from Wesley's sermon: He says, "Money is an excellent gift of God, In the hands of (God's) children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked:

"It gives to the traveler and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of a husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to those who are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!"

I think of the letter we received recently from Andrew Obara. He and his family in Kenya have been going through an unbelievably difficult year.

As many of you know, they had opened their hearts and home to 8 AIDS orphans in addition to their own 5 children, willing to stretch what they had to include one more.

And then, this year, Andrew was downsized from his job. And so we determined to try to increase the amount we were sending them.

Their children have apparently suffered teasing, because their school fees are seldom paid on time. But, thanks to the generosity of many of you, this time their school fees were paid on time.

In his thank you letter, Andrew writes that the children had begun to despair, but now, he says, "we(our church) have breathed life into his household."

A relatively small amount of money for us - For them, it is truly life and hope.

I think of the money we've put up for refugee sponsorship, that has enabled a family who had no future, no where to go, and no protection against the violence suffered in a refugee camp- to start up new lives, and soon to be reunited with the two daughters arriving in October...

Or the money we put in the Outreach fund- on Sundays when we have communion--money that enables us to help people right here in our community- and in our city- so they don't have to go without food or shelter.

Or the money we give to Angel Tree to send children of prison inmates to camp, or to keep them connected with their parent who is prison, by giving and delivering Christmas gifts-

Most importantly, it tells those children that the world is not against them, that despite the violence they've experienced and seen, there IS gentleness, there IS caring, there IS another way. This is what money can do- it can offer a whole new way of living.

Or the money we give to maintain our church, to pay salaries, to offer worship services, to BE a body where God's Word is listened for and where we support one another in living this Christian life, that is so different to the life the world calls us to lead.

We need the support of this body, if we're to live a life different from the dictates of the world. By supporting the church with our money, we support the body that is the household of God, the body that is called to show the world what God is like.

So, what if the head of this household, God, were to ask us today for an accounting of how we use our wealth? The good news in the scripture is that it is not too late- to adjust how we're living and spending.

God, like the owner of the estate, is less interested in what we've done in the past than in what we choose to do today.

In the prayer time that follows, I would invite us all to seek God's leading for our lives- to pray about how we use our money; to listen to God's prompting.

The form of the prayer will be as we did two weeks ago, using the centering prayers printed in our worship folder: the leader will say the words, Lord Jesus Christ, and we will all join with "Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner"; when the leader says, Holy Spirit, we all join in with the rest of that prayer and the same for "Father Almighty,"

And now, let us consider what is required of us Christians, as children of light, as members of God's household, as we sing, "The church is wherever God's people are praising"

