

“The Dishonest Manager”
Luke 16:1-13
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 23, 2007

“When the Pharisees...heard him say these things, they rolled their eyes, dismissing him as hopelessly out of touch.” (Luke 16:14, The Message)

It doesn't take much to imagine the scene. The day was a fairly typical one for Jesus. Around him sat the tax collectors, sinners, and many of the other social and religious outcasts and misfits of his day. Jesus always enjoyed the time he spent with them, and they obviously enjoyed their time with him. Just beyond their little circle stood the scribes and Pharisees, the self-appointed watchdogs of proper Jewish society and the arbitrators of all that was holy. They were, of course, disgusted with everything they saw before them. How could a man who professed to be in tune with the God of their ancestors associate with those who were obviously out of tune with God? It was a question that gnawed at their hearts. And it provided the perfect opportunity for Jesus to share several stories, stories we have come to know as “the parables of the lost.”

“What man would not leave his herd of ninety-nine healthy sheep behind to go and search for that one sheep that was lost?”

“What woman would not search her house high and low until she found the nickel she had lost?”

“And what parent would not wring his or her hands together in worry until that wayward son who had betrayed them safely returned home, and then throw him the biggest party anyone had seen in years?”

We can imagine that Jesus paused from telling that last story for a moment. He could tell that the scribes and Pharisees weren't buying it. Based on the way they had structured their society, they knew that no one in their right mind would ever look for any of those lost things—especially that lost son who had so dishonored the family name.

That little “hrrmp” he heard from them as they shook their heads provided the opening Jesus needed to complete his story. So he looked at them and said:

Now all this time the older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, “Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbequed beef—because he has him home safe and sound.” The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, “Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!” His father said, “Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!”¹

Oh, that made them mad. The scribes and Pharisees were livid after Jesus completed his story. They began to turn and walk away in disgust. Do you know why? Let’s stop our imagining and start thinking. Have you ever heard of moralism? It’s different from morality, that innate sense of right and wrong that is in all of us. The dictionary defines moralism as “judgments about another person’s morality.” More specifically, moralism is the judging of others based but upon one’s own sense of right and wrong. Procrustes is a great example. Remember him? Part of an old Greek myth, he was the innkeeper who had this vision of what size the perfect Greek should be. Whenever guests would stop by, he would tell them that the beds in his inn fit everyone, that no matter how tall or short a guest happened to be, the beds in his inn would be just the right size. What he didn’t tell them is that when they fell asleep, he would sneak into their room and make the people fit those beds by either stretching them out on the rack or whacking off their hands and feet. When they awoke the next morning, every single one of them would fit Procrustes’ vision of what size the perfect Greek should be.

¹ Luke 15:25-32, [The Message](#)

Do you know anyone like Procrustes? I have looked all over this week for a book I once found at a garage sale. Unfortunately, I think it must have got lost in my move up here. Anyway it was entitled Right and Wrong and it was published by The Southern Baptist Sunday School Board back in the 1950s. If any of you have ever spent time in the South, then you probably already know what it is about. Its chapters have such nefarious titles such as “Drinking,” “Smoking,” “Make Up,” and the dreaded “Rock ‘n Roll.” All of those chapters have the same basic message: that in order to be a good little Baptist and pleasing to God, then you must refrain from those great evils of the day. Good Baptists, and by implication good Christians, do not drink alcohol, do not engage in “mixed swimming,” do not go to movies, and definitely do not listen to the demon-inspired music of people like Elvis Presley. You watch him swing those hips, ladies, or swoon when he curls that lip, and you might as well move into the local brothel. It is a wonderful piece of moralism. If I ever find that book, I promise to share it with you. It’s a riot.

Now these days most moralists do not spend their time on such minor stuff like what is found in that old book. Compared to the great ills that face our world today, concerns such as the length of a man’s hair or a woman’s skirt seem rather insignificant. In the forty-some years since that book was written, I have known faithful Southern Baptists who have actually made the pilgrimage to Graceland and even felt okay about doing so. Oh, they cringed when it was discovered that Lisa Marie got her navel pierced, but they have grown a bit past the very limited outlook of that book. That does not mean, however, that moralism isn’t alive and well in our world today. There still seems to be a list of things one must do in order to be a good Baptist, or a good Catholic, or a good Presbyterian, or even a good United Methodist for that matter. Moralism today lifts up the idea that in order to be a true Christian, one must have the “correct” view on such hot-button topics as abortion and homosexuality. True Christians are those who view the Bible in a certain way, who view the family in a certain way, and who vote in a certain way. Why, I even know moralists who believe that if you do not drink fair trade coffee or drive a hybrid vehicle or listen to public radio, then there is something definitely suspect with your theology. Moralism can be found on the right and left, you see. Eugene

Peterson wrote that in whatever form it presents itself, moralism is “the construction of a way of life in which one has no need for God.”² Oh, God is piously mentioned in all the talk of moralism, but it is the conforming to those presumed values, the fitting into its own “Procrustean Bed,” that is the most important.

The scribes and Pharisees were like that. They had their own idea of who was and who was not the “good” and “perfect” Jew. And their idea revolved not around what God desired, but upon their own interpretation of what God desired. That idea, of course, centered upon keeping all the commandments and following the traditional interpretation of those commandments that their own scholars had worked out over the years. Only by dotting every “i” and crossing every “t” of the law could one become “holy.” That was the problem they saw with those people who were sitting with Jesus. Since those “tax collectors and sinners” had not followed the scribes and Pharisees’ exacting interpretation of the law, they were not holy. They didn’t fit their “bed.” Those religious experts had constructed an intricate way of following God that didn’t involve God at all. And not so surprisingly, Jesus took issue with that.

That’s why he told the story of the of the father’s two sons. The scribes and Pharisee’s were smart enough to know that it was not only intended to be a story about those folks who were sitting around Jesus’ table, but a story about them as well. It was clear that Jesus wanted them to know that he saw them as the unforgiving older brother. But that idea was completely unacceptable to them. After all, they were the ones—not those around the table—who had acted according to the law that God had given. They were the ones—not those around the table—who had followed the rules that their religious scholars had carefully worked out over the years. What kind of world would it be if the rules were not followed? What kind of faith would it be if everyone was accepted? And that is when Jesus turned to his disciples and, in a voice loud enough for the Pharisees to hear, told them another story. He said,

² Eugene Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, p. 145

“A businessman suspected that his once-trusted manager was engaging in some rather dishonest business practices so he called in an auditor. When the manager got wind of it and knew he would soon be out of a job, he decided it was time to design his own “golden parachute.” Knowing he was too weak to work and too proud to beg, he hatched a plan with his boss’ clients that would work to his advantage once he was terminated. When the businessman found out about the plan, he scratched his head in amazement. He had to hand it to the manager; he was very creative—creative, but fired just the same.”

That has always been a strange and confusing parable. Sometimes it sounds as if it really doesn’t fit into what Luke wants to say. Yet if you give it some thought, the story of the dishonest manager has some very striking similarities to the story of the youngest son; similarities that the scribes and Pharisees would have instantly recognized. Both the younger son and the dishonest manager had squandered property that had been entrusted to them. Both the younger son and the dishonest manager had moments where they realized they had slipped up and were forced to confront their actions. And both the younger son and the dishonest manager came up with a plan that they hoped would fix the situation in which they found themselves. But that is where the similarities end. For while the younger son recognized his mistake and decided to return to his home, the manager concocted a scam designed to ensure his well-being in whatever the next day would bring. The younger son decided to depend upon the love and mercy of his father, while the dishonest manager decided to rely on his own clever efforts. And in the end, by the time both of these parables came to their appropriate conclusion, who was it that finally found their way home?

This whole section, you see, is about the importance of grace. This whole section is about the failure of moralism—especially the moralism of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus says that in the end, just like the old song says, it is grace that will lead us home. Grace, of course, is the unmerited love of God. Grace is that second chance which none of us deserve. Grace is the leaving of the ninety-nine behind to go out and search for that one lost sheep. Grace is the woman turning the house upside down to look for that one

lost coin. Grace is the father embracing the son who had turned his back on him. Grace is that imaginary family in Nebraska City who threw a party for their runaway daughter that finally came home. And grace is that for which every one of us craves in a world so filled with moralism. There is an interesting story coming out in this week's Newsweek. I do hope that you will read it. A.J. Jacobs decided that he would spend a year trying to follow every rule in the Bible. He carried around a stapled list of the more than 700 rules and prohibitions identified in scripture and consulted many religious authorities about how to follow them. He grew his hair and beard, struggled not to curse, committed no murders, did not wear mixed fabrics, and tried to find an acceptable way to stone his neighbors for their adultery. He even tried to "be the man" and act as the head of his household, which, as he said "didn't translate into reality" at his home. After the experiment, the interviewer asked him, "How's the life of sin?" Jacob responded by saying: *"It's alright. I miss my sin-free life, but I guess I was never sin free. I was able to cut down on my coveting maybe 40 percent, but I was still a coveter. Flat-screen TVs, the front yard of my friend in the suburbs, a better cell phone, higher Amazon rankings. And that's not to mention coveting my neighbor's wife. I live in New York, I work in publishing, so there's a lot of coveting, lying and gossiping."*³

"I miss my sin-free life, but I guess I was never sin-free." A 40% decrease in coveting is admirable, but according to scripture, it still misses the mark. So does a 40% decrease in just about any other area of sin. Yet even though we realize that 40% is a long way from 100%, I think that most of us are still like the scribes and Pharisees. Just like the world around us, most of us are resistant to grace. Most of us think that grace is totally unfair; think that our good works and our hard work should merit some kind of special consideration. But deep down inside, I think that most of us are glad they do not, for I think that most of us know that we will never be able to meet all the requirements of our very demanding world. So let's imagine the scene that started all of this once again. Around a table in the middle of the courtyard sits a group of people with fairly dubious credentials: tax collectors, sinners, illegal immigrants, welfare mothers, AIDS patients, gang members, and a smattering of those who just can't seem to measure up to society's

³ Jennie Yabroff, Newsweek, September 21, 2007

high standards. Standing around them is a group of people whose reputation and standing in the community was unquestioned: scribes, Pharisees, preachers, teachers, taxpayers, veterans, business leaders, and a collection of those who society deems as outstanding. And in the middle of it all sits a young, former carpenter who is saying that ours is a God who calls out to those who sit as well as to those who stand, who doesn't really care about who you are or what you have done, and who is like a lovesick parent who wants so badly for each member of the family to come back home. It is not where you are in that crowd, you see, not whether you are standing or sitting, but whether or not you have realized that there is only one way to come home.

Here's to hoping you come to that realization soon.