

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, what do you think of that? What in the world is he saying here?

You just heard the gospel message today from St. Luke...and you have the insert in your bulletin, so you can take it home. Look at it again later...and wonder yet again, "What IS he saying?"

Jesus tells of the owner of the business, making an unexpected commendation of his soon-to-be-unemployed dishonest manager, "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly." Does this make sense to you? In our modern time, we wonder why Jesus shares this story of the owner praising the dishonest manager who had just caused him to lose a great deal of his wealth. By direct implication, Jesus is commending this dishonesty as well.

"Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth." Jesus did not really say that, did he? Imagine the disciples hearing this story. They probably ask Jesus to repeat himself, and look at each other....Did he really just say that? It seems so...someone remembered it to put it in this gospel.

Jesus has a gift as a talented story teller. Most of them are parables, inviting us to remember the story and digest it. But, it is always a mistake to treat parables in the same way as allegories, and this story in particular could represent real trouble for the interpreter who treats it as allegory. Who is God in the story? Who is the dishonest manager supposed to represent? If anything, this story highlights our need to take great care in interpreting pieces of scripture in light of their context. If we read this passage with the idea to take everything in the Bible literally, we would find ourselves in real trouble and probably in jail.

That is not what Jesus is doing. Whatever he is doing, he continues to believe in and illustrate the kingdom of God, a reality that includes perfect justice and mercy...so we can assume that the dishonest manager, who operates entirely out of self-interest, is not a direct stand-in for God, or for us. I think that Jesus enjoyed in being some kind of a "shock jock". Not only did he not avoid comments or situations that "stirred the pot" of his contemporary status-quo, but he seemed to go out of his way to mix it up. Perhaps it was a desperate urgency on his part, yet he goes to extraordinary lengths to explode with the startling image of the dishonest manager to help us to remember it. But if it is not literal, what are we supposed to make of it? He says, "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."

What exactly is it that Jesus is approving here? Deceit? No. Stealing? Never. Dishonesty? I really do not think so. If we look around, we might get some help with understanding.

The story in Luke that comes immediately before today's story is the very familiar story of the prodigal son, his cranky and jealous older brother, and the forgiving father who is SO forgiving as to not be normal or believable. Today's story may well highlight the same situation: someone in trouble stumbles into grace practically by accident.

In the story of the prodigal, the younger son does not handle himself well at all. He makes some very selfish choices that offend nearly everyone, and only comes to his senses to the degree that he realizes something must change so that he can survive. Continuing to act in his own self-interest, he comes home to discover that grace and forgiveness have been waiting for him the whole time, and we have a sense that he may finally get what it means to be loved.

Here, the dishonest manager is in the same boat and for the same reason...acting completely out of selfishness without concern for the affect on others, just so he can line his pockets with money he did not earn honestly. When the boss learns of it, he figures he is done..big time...and so he continues to act in his own self-interest by cutting deals with his employer's customers. Why? Because he will not really work, and is too good to beg...what a bum! To quote from last Sunday, he qualifies for the label of "Dreg and Scum", if anyone ever did qualify. And, what makes us outraged is that, in this story by Jesus, it works!! It works even better than he had planned...not only do the people who owe money to his boss get a better deal, the manager himself has regained some status in the eyes of his employer because of his shrewdness. Congratulations...you are a thief, and a good one at that! We want him to pay for his dishonesty...in jail or otherwise...and not smelling like a rose. What kind of moral example is this?

Well, it is NOT a moral example. This story is NOT about justice...handed out by the owner privately, or by the authorities, or even by God. Instead, this is a story about what one commentator calls "crazy, upside-down grace". With the outrageousness of these facts in this story, Jesus seems to be following up or comparing it to the story of the prodigal son...and revealing what we would conclude to be the ridiculous nature of God's grace, and our call to live in it.

Jesus commends the shrewd but dishonest manager as an example, not for his dishonest dealings, but for his clever solution....and yet he does not stop there. He says this manager...who is "of this world," meaning someone whose values are entirely self-oriented....has managed to scratch and claw his way into a better situation. So what, Jesus asks, can my followers do with the grace of God behind them?

What he himself has been busy doing: healing, reconciling, truth-telling, and proclaiming the kingdom. We must be as clever as the manager in today's gospel, with a different goal: serving our self-interest, alongside the best interests of the world that God loves, by building the kingdom of God. In order to "love things heavenly," we must turn toward the dust and dirt of which we are made, and try to envision and build the reign of God.

When we get anxious about money, status, power, what titles we have, what kind of car we drive, what brand of clothes we wear...when we get anxious about those things, we use our best skills for ourselves alone. This story is a reminder that in spite of ourselves, we are bathed in grace and forgiveness...that we are called to be shrewd about recognizing grace and sharing it...that we are called to love things heavenly, by loving God's creation, seeking justice for everyone.

Most important, today's gospel is centered on one action...forgiveness. The manager intends to make his own situation better when he forgives his master's debtors, but the more he thinks about it, the better it gets...the people who have owed his master more than they will ever be able to repay are suddenly going to have their burden lightened. That also is going to make the master look good. So, conceivably, everybody wins. In this case, forgiveness...which is an act, not a feeling...has positive consequences for everyone.

We can get hung up on dishonesty and the manipulation, and we would like to get away from that kind of behavior. But, Jesus chooses his story illustrations carefully, and this one sticks in the memory precisely because it is outside the boundaries of any conventional morality tale.

No matter who does the forgiving, it creates ever-widening circles of positive consequences. Forgiveness, Jesus seems to be saying, is the starting point for building the kingdom of God, and of course, this cycle begins with God's grace toward us. If God kept score, we would be in some serious trouble. But God's grace precedes our entire existence, and if we choose to be kingdom-builders, we begin by accepting God's grace, and extending our own forgiveness to others.

There is really no other way to transform our limited sense of eye-for-eye justice into an expansive sense of God's justice and mercy...and the good news of today's gospel is not immediately obvious, but it is there.

Forgiveness is the engine that drives our journey toward the kingdom, and we who receive it gladly are called to share it freely...which, in turn, causes us to "be freed" by what we value as the ridiculous nature of God's grace. Crazy, upside-down grace in our world....yet only the everyday order of business and life in the next, all within the mystery and indescribable dynamic of the love of the Trinity, known to us in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.