

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, September 18, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Micah 6:3-8; Psalm 112; Luke 16:1-13
“Faithful with little, faithful with much”

Casting my mind back 100 years to my New Testament 101 class, I seem to remember hearing about two schools of thought among Biblical scholars. I am sure there are more than two, but these are the ones I want to mention today.

One school of thought says that Jesus used story-telling as a teaching tool. He lived in an oral culture, where information and history and cultural traditions were recorded and passed on by word of mouth. Telling stories would make his point more easily understood by his audience. And it would make them more easily remembered and passed on by his followers as they began their mission to make disciples of all nations.

The other school of thought among Biblical scholars that I remember is referred to as the Messianic secret. This developed primarily from the study of the miracles that St Mark records Jesus performing in his Gospel. A number of times, Mark says that after Jesus performed a miracle, he urged his followers to stay silent about it, and not talk about it or tell anyone about it.

And by extension, the idea of the Messianic secret is that Jesus told the parables primarily, if not exclusively, for only his closest followers to hear and think about, and almost to conceal his message from the general public until after his death and resurrection.

Interesting schools of thought. Both can be supported by the Biblical evidence. And they both have some merit. Especially when we look at today's reading from Luke's Gospel.

A rich man has a manager. At best the manager is incompetent; at worst he is downright dishonest. The rich man's property is being squandered. The manager is fired, dismissed with cause in today's employment language. The manager gets – or continues to be – crafty. He takes steps to buy his way into favour with others by cheating his employer some more. Books are cooked, accounts are fiddled, debts are written off. And when the master learns what is going on, instead of having the dishonest manager brought to justice and punished for his wrong-doing, he commends him *because he had acted shrewdly* Luke 16:9. The children of this age seem to get the better of the children of light. Dishonest wealth buys an entry to eternal homes.

What on earth do we make of a parable like that? It's hard to see any clear, straightforward message that Jesus was trying to get across. Maybe it's that Messianic secret again.

It was so much simpler for Micah. No dishonesty for him, no embezzlement, no fiddling of accounts or cooking of books. . . . *what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* Micah 6:8. Simple as that. The Lord has shown you what is good – just go and do it.

And just as simple though in a different way, for the Psalmist. To the Psalmist, those who fear the

Lord and delight in the Lord's commandments are happy. Their descendants will be mighty in the land; their generation will be blessed, they will have wealth and riches in their houses. Those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice, will never be moved, they are secure in the Lord, and in the end they will look in triumph on their foes. Unlike the wicked, who *see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing* Psalm 112:10.

For the Psalmist, it was a case of do what is right and you will be blessed by God. Do what is wrong and it will all come to nothing. For Micah, it was a case of you know what God would have you do; just go and do it. In the parable, it seems to be a case of be shrewd, look after yourself and your own interests, no matter who it hurts.

Can that really be what Jesus was saying???

Or might it be something else? Think for a moment about why the master ends up commending the manager. Some scholars argue that the manager may not have been dishonest at all. Maybe he was just well-meaning but incompetent.

And if he was, by reducing the debts that were owed to his master, he may have been trying to make things right by giving up the commission that he would have been entitled to. That way, the master didn't lose anything, and the manager would win favour with the people who were paying the debt. Sounds reasonable, though it doesn't really explain why the manager is consistently referred to as "the dishonest manager."

Or might it be that the parable isn't about the manager at all, whether he was well-meaning but incompetent or dishonest? Maybe it's about the master.

There is nothing in the parable to suggest that the master acted in any way inappropriately. He had a manager who was not doing his job, so he let him go. Exactly what any employer would do under the circumstances. He didn't have seek to have the manager punished, though he was presumably entitled to do so. He simply let him go, to find a new position and make a new life for himself. And when he discovers what the manager had done and how he had treated the people who owed him money, he didn't go after the manager for restitution and repayment. He commended him for his shrewd, if shady, business practice. And – presumably, because we are not told as much specifically – forgave him.

Could this actually be a parable about grace? Let me read again the words of Philip Yancey that I used as the words of assurance a few minutes ago:

Jesus forgave a thief dangling on a cross, knowing full well that the thief had converted out of fear. That the thief would never study the Bible, never attend synagogue or church, and never make amends to those he had wronged. He simply said, 'Jesus, remember me,' and Jesus promised, 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' It was another shocking reminder that grace does not depend on what we do for God, but rather on what God has done for us.

But if it was a parable about grace, how do we square that with what Luke records a few verses

later about how *you cannot serve God and wealth* Luke 16:13? In his New Testament Translation, The Message, Eugene Peterson renders it: *you can't serve God and the bank*. The King James Version talks about not serving God and mammon. The Oxford Annotated Bible says that mammon is the Greek transliteration of a Semitic word that probably means "that in which one fully trusts," though I'm not sure anyone fully trusts even a bank nowadays.

One of the challenges is looking at this text is that we are probably looking at several sayings of Jesus from different times and occasions that Luke has gathered together as if they were all said on the same occasion. They share a common theme – money, and our attitude to it, and how that touches on our relationship with God. But the sayings are not directly linked in the way they may appear when we read them as a block.

The parable itself probably ends halfway through verse 8, when the *master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly*. And the rest of the passage may include as many as four other separate sayings of Jesus: about the children of this age and the children of light; about being welcomed into the eternal homes; about being faithful in little and faithful in much; and about the impossibility of serving two masters.

And the last of these sayings, the one about the two masters, may be there to wrap the package up neatly, because it may be the one most closely connected with the parable.

And it may be the one that ties back to the words of Micah from hundreds of years before Jesus, about doing what God has told us is good and what the Lord requires of us.

Not so that we will be commended as the dishonest manager was commended, but because by the grace of God made known in Jesus Christ our Lord, we have, in the language of the parable, already been commended. The Gospel doesn't say "live this way this and God will love you," but "God loves you – go and live and speak and act and behave as if you believe that."

I like what Peter S Hawkins writes about this passage in Christianity Today. He wrestles thoughtfully and honestly with the text, and then he concludes:

What if the point in the end is not to learn anything in particular but rather to extend a "welcome home" to the shrewd and the faithful alike, to everyone entrusted with those "true riches" that are the coin of God's realm?