

What an insane thing for Jesus to say! Parables about restoring lost sheep, lost fortunes, broken family that preaches, but this parable comes across as if Jesus praised the Bernie Madoffs and Kenneth Lays of ENRON, telling us as believers to be just as dishonest! Actually, what Jesus says in the Parable is not that we be dishonest, but that we be as SHREWD as the world.

With all of the recent storms, how many of us have had Insurance Claims and Repair work done? Imagine a time long ago, before legal contracts and estimates and multiple bids. When major business deals did not involve Boards of Trustees and files of papers, where a contract between businesses was as simple as an IOU. However, this Steward is described as both dishonest and accused of unethical practices, so we can expect that changing interest rates and compounding debt had happened possibly without the Rich Man's full knowledge. SO when the Steward is being fired, he calls in the IOUs but instead of telling them what they owe, he asks them to tell him what they owe, inviting their participation. Then he cuts the debts significantly. When the audit is done, instead of IOUs, all accounts receivable have been paid in full and while his own purse is not as full as he had intended, the Steward now has others who owe him a favor. One possibility for hearing this is that the Steward is praised for helping his Master avoid shame for uncollectable debts, and helping the debtors avoid shame for having their full debts called in.

The author of Luke tried to interpret this parable "Whoever can be trusted very little can be trusted with much... and no one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money." But that sounds more like the Parable of the Talents, where those who traded are rewarded as "Good and Faithful Servants."

I prefer to think of this Parable as Jesus making an inside joke. Remember at the start of these Parables of the Lost, that the Pharisees and Scribes were listening and troubled by his forgiveness for sinners. In the ancient world Pharisees and Scribes were "Rich Men" and their accusations made Jesus forgiveness of sins to be like the accusation of the Steward forgiving debts. When in fact he cancels the Sinners debts entirely.

I would like to do something unheard of this morning. In seminary we were taught two cardinal rules: Never tell people where they need to sit, and never talk about Money. I hope you are comfortable where you are. But I would like us to think about Money, WITHOUT asking for Money! The one topic everyone can agree upon is that once the economy re-opened after the COVID shut-down, inflation has hit us all. Instead of 2 and 3 percent per year, month over month inflation has been 7%, 8% even 10%. And following the most significant Federal Reserve Rate Hikes in 50 years, the most recent month's numbers caused the Stock Market to become Bearish. So what shall the Church say about Money?

FIRST, several have said in recent weeks they appreciate that our sermons connect with current events, and that perhaps the decline in many churches is because what is said on Sunday avoids connecting with real life Monday through Saturday.

SECOND, there are few people who do not struggle with money issues:

What to spend on; How much to spend; How to save; How much to share.

Our use of money reflects our priorities, values, ethics and commitments.

THIRD, while at times the intersection of our faith and real life pinches us, this where faith becomes real!

All of which remind me of three true stories.

A 150 years ago, there was a little church in a farming community that never had enough money to pay their bills. No one wanted to be Treasurer because monthly you were the bad guy reporting how much more people needed to give. Finally, the owner of the Grange consented that he would be Treasurer, which everyone thought was a wonderful idea because he was accustomed to buying and selling all of the Grain and Produce from their farms. But he had one requirement. He would not issue a single report until

year end. Throughout the year people worried what was going on, but different from past years there seemed to be enough money every week to pay the Preacher, the Musicians, to fund Missions and pay Utilities. At year end, the Treasurer reported that all of the bills had been paid ON TIME, all past debt had been ERASED, and they had half of the money necessary as a down payment to replace the roof!

When the applause died down, the Pastor asked the Treasurer how this miracle could be?

The Treasurer replied that whenever people came to the Grange, instead of charging them by the pound, bushel, or wagon, he charged them adding what he thought they should be giving. Because it came off of the top, they had never missed their giving to the church. Whereupon he was thanked for his shrewdness, but responsibility for being Treasurer was given to someone else.

For over 100 years there were 3 Presbyteries that jointly owned a Church Camp. Many in each congregation had fond memories of having gone to Camp as a child, having learned about God there, having met their true love and gotten engaged at the Camp. However, over the decades, mortgages had been taken out, with each Presbytery backing the loans with their Presbytery's assets. While everything was legal, just as with the Parable, in the 1970s and 1980s interest rates skyrocketed, and by this early part of the Century the Camp owed over \$2,000,000. Making matters worse, insurance rates on Church Camps became outrageous because of the liability of children having accidents, as well as legal concerns about child abuse. But the biggest problem was that as nostalgic as people felt, their grandchildren no longer were attracted to sleeping in tents and dormitories, going without television and video games for the summer, so for Decades the Camp compounded deficits. Every few years, the Camp Board would wait until the last possible date to come before each of the Presbyteries saying that the mortgages needed to be refinanced, with no hope of ever being paid off, and with no alternative they grumbled and did so. Relationship between the Camp Board and between the Presbyteries had gotten so tense, a Special Meeting was called to discuss whether to refinance yet again or sell the Camp? One pastor stood up, saying ***"I had come prepared to vote to be rid of this, but this Sunday I need to preach on this Parable from Luke. It occurs to me that like the Steward, instead of selling the camp or refinancing, we could recognize that currently all of us share this responsibility, so what if we paid off our portion of the debt, asking the other Presbyteries to consider doing the same! For the next five years the Camp could operate Free of ALL Debt and if it can balance its costs, then well and good. If not, at the end of the fifth year, we will sell the Camp, having given it every opportunity; instead of where we currently are, we would then have a Clear Title for Sale, and the kids that have gone would have had this experience.*** The idea passed overwhelmingly. I wish I could say that everyone lived happily ever after, but at the end of the 5 years the Camp did need to be sold, with everyone having given their best.

At a Committee meeting this week, someone said "Pastor you have said that this church is different from other churches you have served, what do you mean?" When I came to my last church they treated Mission as funding Charities, so annually the Mission Committee would divide the Budget equally between every cause that had sent them an appeal. Because they funded 200 different charities, each received \$50/ year. So we suggested ***"What if we picked one and worked to resolve that circumstance."*** It meant that the church adopted that cause, and for the first few years the church provided all the administration of that project, all of their mailings, all the postage and business fees financed as a mission of the church, but over 2-5 years as each project became self-sustaining, and spun off as separate non-profit organizations. No longer could we claim control of them, but they were do what we wanted done!

I do not know the full story, but I am told that years ago our congregation considered purchasing a local property, and as the GVR has discovered there were problems that prevented purchase.

But I wonder, we support several incredible missions in Nogales, some needing a new home... What if we

dreamed of purchasing property in Nogales for their building the structures they need?

**I tell you, use Worldly Wealth to change the world yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings!**