

“Living with Messiness”
September 18, 2022
Scripture: Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13

This story from Jesus is described by Episcopal priest and scholar Robert Capon as “the hardest parable.” Theologians and interpreters have struggled for centuries to understand what Jesus is trying to convey here and how it can inform disciples in our own time. So, of course, in the next ten minutes or so I’ll give you the definitive interpretation of this parable so we can all put our questions to rest! You’re welcome!

Last week I shared some insights from Amy-Jill Levine’s wonderful book on Jesus’ parables, *Short Stories by Jesus*. She tackles several of the tougher stories, but not this one. She does, however, mention it in her epilogue. She says about this story, “Poor Luke goes through numerous machinations to turn this story into a lesson about evangelism: ‘Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth (unrighteous mammon)’”. That may be what the manager did, but that’s not a great lesson for matters of reconciliation, justice, or compassion. Something else must be going on.” I think she’s right. I think there’s more to this story than meets the eye. And if we believe that Jesus really did intend to inform his followers and not just confuse them, then it’s worth digging a little deeper to see what we can find.

One assumption I always bring to my reading of the gospels is they emerge from the real world. Jesus lived and taught in the real world, not some idealized fantasy world. And if there’s one thing we know about the real world, the everyday world where all of us have to live and work and survive, is it is messy. Good and bad, love and hate, integrity and dishonesty are all thrown in together and are often very hard to distinguish from one another. The world is not some pitched battle between good and evil that anyone can easily navigate. In fact, we are all motivated by contradictory forces within ourselves that make it hard to sort out the best, most faithful path for our lives.

If that weren’t so, we wouldn’t need spiritual masters like Jesus to challenge us through their inscrutable sayings and stories that make us pause and reflect and go deeper. What is it about this story we find so hard to accept? It looks like Jesus is using the actions of a dishonest person as an example for his disciples to follow. In the gospel this story follows on the heels of the story of a father who welcomes home a son who has squandered his inheritance. The father says nothing about the son’s need to pay anything back or work off the losses. He just welcomes him with open arms. In a similar way the owner commends the dishonest manager for being shrewd instead of punishing him for cooking the books. Neither of those scenarios sounds very realistic but both of them rely on a world where compassion and reconciliation outweigh retribution. Both the son who squanders his inheritance and the dishonest manager are willing to plunge into the world’s messiness and trust they’ll come through it unharmed.

I think Jesus is encouraging his followers to be courageous and risky in a world that is unpredictable and messy. Living cautiously, doing everything we can to avoid the mess, might feel more secure but it doesn’t bring us closer to God’s kingdom. I don’t think that’s a license to be dishonest. If anything, he’s encouraging them to be fearlessly honest. He wants them to look

deeply at their true motives, to admit when they're more concerned for their own survival than for the well-being of those around them. Life in God's kingdom is never only about our own salvation. While the dishonest manager may have been shrewd, he was in the end only looking to save his own skin. Jesus' disciples need to be shrewd, too; they need to be able to use the resources at their disposal, but for the wholeness of others and not just their own.

I remember hearing some years ago about a group of students led by Tony Campolo, a professor of sociology and an evangelical Christian, who purchased stock in a sugar company that did business in the Dominican Republic. They were aware that the business was treating the workers there unfairly, so as stockholders they attended the annual shareholders meeting and lobbied the company to change its practices. Jesus might say they were using dishonest wealth to bring change into the messiness of that company's behavior. I don't know how that turned out ultimately. I suspect it was mostly a lesson in the limits of small shareholders in a large conglomerate, but it might have planted a seed or two among other shareholders. The point is they took a risk and did what they could to hold a huge corporation accountable for its impact on the lives of vulnerable people.

Just last week I heard about the owner of the clothing company Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard, who has decided to turn over controlling interest in his company, valued at three billion dollars, to a trust that will use future profits to help fight climate change. At 83 he's decided he doesn't want to live in a world where wealth is distributed to a very few at the top, while doing damage to the planet at the expense of the vast majority of poor people. Apparently, he was motivated to do it by a Forbes article five years ago that named him as a billionaire. It made him mad because that's not what he ever wanted to be. He says he hopes giving away the company "will influence a new form of capitalism that doesn't end up with a few rich people and a bunch of poor people." The only way through the messiness of life without being drowned in it is to do something bold and unexpected, something that will flip the conversation on its head.

That begins with fearless honesty, like what we hear from Amos when he confronts his world. He sees what they're doing to each other and he calls it out. It may be the case that not everyone behaved the way Amos described but their society made it easy for those who did. And no one seemed willing to speak up about it. Amos did and they did everything they could to shut him up. No one likes to be reminded of the messiness of life. It's not easy to hear about your shortcomings, your inconsistencies. We much prefer living in the illusion that if we're doing okay then everyone else must be okay too, and if they aren't it's not our problem because our lives don't affect theirs.

But if there's one thing Jesus wants his disciples to understand, it's that we're all connected. Everyone's life affects everyone else's. Even when we don't realize it. The clothes I'm wearing were stitched together somewhere in the world where people are being underpaid and overworked, without proper healthcare or possibly shelter, so it could be sold cheaply enough for me to buy. Nothing I wear or eat was the result of anything I did directly. It's all through the efforts of thousands of people in the world who are faceless and nameless to me but who have aspirations and desires and responsibilities for others just like I do. Without their work what would any of us do? How can we really imagine our lives aren't connected to theirs?

Jesus says in the end we can't serve two masters, God and wealth. But that doesn't mean we can't use wealth as a tool for God's work in the world. But if we want to do that we'll have to live with the messiness of it. We'll have to sort out our real motives and be fearlessly honest about who we are and whose well-being we really want to serve. If we want to be "children of light" then we need to be willing to shine light on realities our generation would rather keep hidden. It takes courage and smarts and a little audacity but we can be the disciples God needs us to be in this world. We can be agents of compassion, reconciliation and justice and bring to our messy world God's message of hope.

Amen