

The Virtues of Vices

Luke 16:1-13

September 23, 2007

I.

Today's reading is one of the more difficult and perplexing stories in Luke's Gospel. It seems to speak favorably of shady dealings. Over the years theologians and scholars have come up with several opinions about what it really means.

We just heard how a manager of his master's wealth was going to lose his job. So the manager decided to cook the books with some of his master's debtors, and give them discounts so that they might return the favor and take care of him later when he had no income.

Two things here seem troubling. One is that the master "commended the dishonest manager because he acted shrewdly," and some scholars interpret Jesus' uncritical reaction as approval of the master's commendation. The other is that Jesus actually urged his disciples to "make friends for [themselves] by dishonest wealth." What are we to think of this?

Like many parts of the Bible, this reading cannot be understood in a vacuum. We should consider three additional things. First, we should be familiar with how Luke described Jesus' teachings about wealth in other parts of his Gospel. Second, it helps to know how business practices in first century Palestine were different in some ways from our practices today. And finally, we should realize that Jesus told this story as a parable that contained a lesson, and not as a literal example of action to be taken.

Let's start with the big picture. Once again, we have a story of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem and his destiny on the cross, and once again during this journey Jesus emphasized issues of wealth, poverty, and stewardship in the context of God's kingdom.

And a recurring theme throughout Luke's Gospel is that the rich were neglecting the poor. Those with wealth were using their money contrary to God's wishes. The parables and sayings of Jesus often treat the very possession of wealth as corrupting one's relationship with God unless it also is used to care for those in need.

The second important factor, one that is not apparent from the reading itself, is how Jewish law affected the way people did business at the time. It was unlawful to charge interest or finance charges on loans or purchases. This was known as usury. Don't a lot of people today wish that Jewish law applied to their credit card statements?

But people easily avoided these prohibitions. They simply increased the amounts of notes or the prices of goods to include hidden interest or finance charges. Or, as we saw today, they took payment in commodities such as olive oil or wheat in order to disguise these additional payments and make it more difficult to know what actually was owed and what was added on.

In addition, managers of property frequently were not paid salaries, but rather made their livings by putting their own commissions on top of the amounts of their masters' money they were able to lend, or the prices of their masters' goods they were able to sell.

Finally, because the reading is a parable like the story of the prodigal son, and not a narrative such as the story of Martha and Mary, we must look for meanings not apparent on the surface.

II.

So, with that background, we can examine this reading more deeply. The key parts are these. Jesus described a wealthy master who told his manager that he, the manager, was going to be

discharged for squandering the master's property, and the master asked the manager for an accounting of his work. We don't know how the manager had been squandering the property, but it's not important here.

But we do know the manager feared the loss of his position could cause him to live in poverty. As a result, before he gave the accounting to his master, he gathered the masters' debtors and took it upon himself to reduce the amounts they owed. His purpose was to make them obligated to him in the hope they would give him a job or place to stay after he was fired.

Upon learning what happened, the master commended the manager for his shrewdness, and Jesus did not criticize that assessment. The next verse is even more difficult because Jesus told the disciples to "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

So, does all this mean that we should praise shady dealings, or that we can buy our way into heaven? Should we accept or use money that might come from questionable sources?

Let's fast forward to the present time. At sometime or another you all probably have watched or heard about "The Sopranos." It's a critically acclaimed TV series about a gangster and his family. A lot of it portrays human interest situations, but an important part of the story is that Tony Soprano is a leader in the mob in New Jersey. And although he claims to earn his money from his waste management business, it's also apparent that his family's lifestyle is financed by ill-gotten gains.

The TV series now is over. It ended this spring. No more Sopranos. When we see them again it will be through re-runs. So, imagine for a minute, what if the Sopranos were real, and gave up their old ways, and moved from New Jersey to Diamondhead to start over legitimately? And what if they wanted to join St. Thomas? Would we let them in? Being good Christians, I imagine we would welcome them like anyone else.

But then, what if they wanted to get involved in the church? Could we commend them for Christian service as the master in today's Gospel commended his manager? And what if they wanted to make a pledge to the church? Would we accept their money? We know from the TV series how they got some of it in the past. Can we in good conscience take it?

Interesting questions, aren't they? Let's go back to today's reading and see if there is any connection between what Jesus said two thousand years ago and the idea that the Sopranos might show up on our doorstep tomorrow.

III.

The first difficulty in the reading is that the master commended his manager for what appeared to be improper actions, and Jesus did not challenge that.

Different theories exist about this. One is that the master only praised his manager's shrewdness, not his shadiness. The manager's actions, although fraudulent, were based on quick thinking and foresight, which apparently was OK. To me, this is possible, but not the best explanation.

Another theory is that is that the manager only deducted unlawful interest charges, or else his own commissions, so the master was not deprived of anything to which he was legally entitled anyway. The manager made a short term sacrifice in hopes of long term gain, or he did what the God's law required for interest payments. This theory also is possible, but it makes it more difficult to consider the manager as dishonest, which is how he is described in the reading.

For me, the best explanation is that the master's commendation was only grudging respect. It certainly was not praise. Why would it be? We don't know the words he used, but I imagine

they could have been something like “well, you got me this time.” It is virtually certain the manager did not mean “job well done.” It might be something like sporting events where members of the losing team shake hands with the winners.

The more puzzling question however, is Jesus’ instruction to his disciples to make friends through dishonest wealth. The traditional interpretation, with which I agree, is that Jesus recognized that worldly goods contain inherent dangers, but can be wisely used. His instructions were exhortations to prepare for eternity by wisely using all that God has given, including money. To the extent that Jesus even used the manager as an example, it was because he was resourceful in canceling debts, and Jesus wanted the disciples to be equally resourceful in doing their work as they cared for the poor and spread the Gospel.

Thus, Jesus did not use the manager as an example to be imitated, but as an example of someone who was effective in worldly affairs. By extension, Jesus urged the disciples to be effective in their spiritual and godly affairs. This same idea is expressed in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus told his disciples that “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (10:16).

IV.

So, what does this mean today? What do we do when the Sopranos show up and make an offer we can’t refuse, so to speak? Well, we take them into the church, just as Jesus wanted his disciples to bring people to Christ. Jesus sought out sinners. We might save Tony’s soul.

And what do we do if they want to work in the church? What if Carmela Soprano volunteered to teach Sunday School? I imagine we would try to find a place for her, just as Jesus urged his disciples to deal with the world as it is and find ways to bring people to faith.

Do we accept the Sopranos’ money, their pledge? Perhaps not, but a case also can be made for doing so if we assume they now would be law abiding citizens. Stewardship is a personal spiritual discipline and not just a church budgetary matter. It is part of our life of faith that just happens to affect the church. A wise old priest once said that it is more important that people give than the church receive. This would apply to all of us, including the Sopranos.

So, the point is that this somewhat unconventional reading, whether we agree with it or not, calls to wisely use all of creation, even those parts that have been diverted from God’s use to the world’s use. It tells us to accept the Sopranos of the world, and to start from the premise that the church can bring them to faith.

That is what Jesus meant when told the disciples how to deal with dishonest wealth. His meaning was to return that wealth to its purpose intended by God without compromising our faith, just as Jesus told the disciples to go into the world shrewdly, but with innocence.

V.

So for us, today’s gospel calls us to work in the world as we find it, not as we might prefer it to be. Jesus knew that his disciples would encounter snares and pitfalls as they continued his ministry, and he wanted them to know that through both shrewdness and faith they could deal with the world.

This is a message for the church today. We do not always have to follow the conventional approach. We can think outside the box as our own definition of shrewdness. We are the children of light in today’s Gospel, and we should be prepared to engage the children of this age. With a shrewd and faithful use of resources the light of Christ will show the way, and we can discover anew how the Spirit can lead us. *Amen.*