

I'm going to start by sharing a story from the pastor of a church in Chicago. He told it like this:

*What if I told you that, during my first year as a pastor, a drug dealer approached me and said he had a \$40,000 gift for the church, and that this gift was his way of making amends for his past deeds?*

*Take a second and simply ask, What would I do in this situation?*

*Ready?*

*Would you be mad at me for telling him that I'd accept his gift? Or for the fact that during the conversation I was already making plans for the good we could do with this dishonest money?*

*And would it be egregious if, after he was settled in his decision, I told him that giving the church this money wouldn't solve his problems? (After all, he was still selling drugs!)*

*I should have kept quiet. Once he realized that the problem was not what he did with his money but how he earned it and what he was doing to people...well, he decided to work on his heart instead of giving away his money.*

*Don't say it. I know you're thinking it. And don't worry: I said it. "You know, you could do both!"<sup>1</sup>*

That story is at least as complicated as the parable we just heard. A manager basically cheats his boss out of some of what's owed him in order to save his own skin. But not only does the boss praise his manager for being shrewd; Jesus tells his disciples that they should do the same...or at least do something similar. We're supposed to learn something from this tricky manager. But what, exactly?

It's a very confusing parable. In fact, the more I studied it this week, the more confused I got. So you can see why I decided to use the story of Zacchaeus for the children's sermon instead.

---

<sup>1</sup> Julian DeShazier, "Money in our hearts (Luke 16:1-13; Amos 8:4-7)," *The Christian Century*, 20 September 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/money-our-hearts-luke-161-13-amos-84-7> Accessed 21 September 2019.

But I told the story of Zacchaeus to help the rest of us out, too. You see, after this parable, Jesus tries to explain what he means by it. He talks about dishonest wealth and how we should use it faithfully – which is exactly what we see Zacchaeus doing in that story. Zacchaeus was a rich chief tax collector, which means he got his wealth by collecting money from others, and probably telling the tax collectors under him to collect a more than was necessary and so that they and he could skim off the top. It's like he was at the head of a pyramid scheme.

So by the time Zacchaeus meets Jesus, he has piled up a lot of dishonest wealth. But through learning from Jesus, Zacchaeus realizes he has a chance to do things differently. So he decides to use that dishonest wealth faithfully: he gives half of his possessions to the poor and he pays back – three times over – those he has cheated (Luke 19:1-10). In today's reading Jesus says, "Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth," and *be faithful with dishonest wealth*, and Zacchaeus does both of those things.

There's another link between the Zacchaeus story and today's story. In the middle of the Zacchaeus story, when Jesus says "Zacchaeus, come down here! For I'm going to your house today," the people who see this happening start to grumble: "[Jesus] has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

And today's parable follows on the tail of the Pharisees and scribes – the religious leaders -- grumbling about the same thing: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). And then Jesus tells three stories about how much God loves to seek out sinners and welcome that back into God's family: the short parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, which we read in worship last week, and then the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Right after that famous parable comes today's story about the dishonest manager.

I know I'm jumping all over the place today, but hold on with me for one more jump. If we go back again, from today's parables, past the stories of the lost and found, and back to the point where Jesus starts telling these stories, here's what we see: there's the grumbly religious leaders I just told you about, and then right before that Luke sets the scene like this: "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him" (Luke 15:1).

So in a way Jesus has three separate audiences gathered together while he's telling all these stories: there are his disciples, who have a long way to go, but who are basically on board with what Jesus is doing; there are the religious leaders, who don't like that Jesus is mixing with sinners; and then there are the "sinners" themselves – including tax collectors like Zacchaeus – who are gathered around to hear what the holy man has to say about them. These others religious leaders clearly think they don't stand a chance;

that they'll always be sinners, that they need to be kept away from the good people; but what does Jesus have to say? Is there any hope for them? Any chance of forgiveness, a new start, being welcomed into God's family?

By the time Jesus gets to the story we heard this morning, those "sinners" have just heard three stories which teach that God longs to find and welcome sinners, and God celebrates when they are back in the fold. Hopefully they are starting to feel welcomed, to feel wanted, to feel God's love claiming them. And then they hear this strange parable about the dishonest manager. What might they hear in this story?

One thing they might hear is that even if they are caught in the middle of a wrong, dishonest situation – if they are, like the dishonest manager, stuck in bad situation – they don't stand condemned by what they've done in the past or even where they are right now. They can still change. Like Zacchaeus, they can start using their ill-gotten gains or their bad situation for good. And then they can start to build a new life, where God is their only master. And they might hear something just as good: when they do this difficult thing, when they change, they'll make new friends. They'll have new support, which will last them eternally.<sup>2</sup>

And the disciples might hear: You, use what you've got to make friends, too – since a time is coming when things will get dangerous for you – and you'll need to be just as shrewd as this dishonest manager.

And the religious leaders might hear (if they have ears to hear): people – even these big-time sinners -- can change their ways, if they're given the right reasons.

So what about us?

Maybe some of us need to be reminded that change is possible – for us, for others in our communities, and even for the people we'd call "obvious sinners" in our own time. Change is possible for the folks in prison, for the folks in rehab, and for the folks in our own lives we're worried about – there is always hope for change through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And maybe some of us need to hear something more direct, like the sinners gathered around Jesus, straining to hear every word.

The pastor who told that story I shared at the beginning of this sermon, the one about the drug dealer, he goes on to say: "Every faith community has a few 'drug dealers' –

---

<sup>2</sup> Julian DeShazier, "September 22, Ordinary 25C (Luke 16:1-13; Amos 8:4-7), *The Christian Century*, 27 August 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/september-22-ordinary-25c-luke-161-13-amos-84-7> Accessed 22 September 2019.

wealthy folk doing questionable work.” And, I’d add, every congregation has people who find themselves trapped in dishonest situations of some kind, wondering how they can be faithful when there is no obviously faithful option. And there are people who feel stuck in their own habits and wonder how they can change.

“Do we use money [or whatever it is we have, including our time and energy] to love God’s people as an act of worship, or do we use money to serve our own interests? Do our riches come at the expense of others, or do we continue to abide in a moral vision that protects our neighbors as God’s children?”<sup>3</sup>

For us today, that pastor sums up this parable like this: “Do some good, you dishonest people, even if it means you have to take a loss to finally get on the right track.”

So first there’s that call to re-examine ourselves, our situation, and how we use what we’ve got...and then there’s some good news to go along with it: Change is possible. There is always hope for new life. And God us friends to support our new life – we won’t be alone as we turn towards God’s way.

Let us pray.

*O God, give us grace to discern what your love demands of us, that, being faithful to you in things both great and small, we may serve you with an undivided heart. Amen.*<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> From the same “Money in our hearts...” article by Julian DeShazier.

<sup>4</sup> 15th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, “Scripture (Series 2, Complementary),” from *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002). <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=280> Accessed 22 September 2019.