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“Make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth.”

So now Jesus is recommending we all get into Ponzi schemes?

If you're like me, at first hearing your response to Luke today may have been, "What was that all about? This bible stuff has reached new heights of obscurity today!" Admittedly, it takes a little digging, but it's well worth the effort.

It is important to remind ourselves of the setting of this story.

As you will hear me say often, when trying to understand Scripture, context is everything.

So, as there is no indication of any scene change,

we can assume that Jesus is still at last week's dinner party where he is sitting with outcasts and sinners...

and a group of religious legalists whose nose's are out of joint.

They keep testing Jesus with questions about how best to live,

and he keeps giving them compelling, though sometimes odd, insights.

Throughout the party, Jesus has offered the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Two Lost Sons (aka the Prodigal Son).

These three stories about God's love, not rejection, of sinners and outcasts,

plus the fact that they are told in an intimate setting of table fellowship,

give the disciples and the other guests an experience

of how good God's desire for them can be when they are together.

The appropriate attitude towards "outcasts and sinners" is an open heart,

one that instructs through the love that expresses itself in willing the best for another, no matter where that other comes from,

or what treatment popular opinion says they deserve.

I can imagine that Jesus' audience had a vast array of responses to this message.

It goes right to the heart of identity issues:

how does God see us? how does this shape how we see one another?

or how we see God?

how do I convince myself of my righteousness or goodness

by making others less than I am?

We are known by the company we keep and if Jesus' stories have had any impact, this group is about to begin keeping new company.

They will be breaking down ancient barriers, re-arranging their vision of God,

and opening themselves to new lives shaped by a new vision of who they are, formed by God and not popular opinion.

Now, Jesus is no dummy.

He knows that one of the biggest divisions in any setting, in any time, between people is between those who have and those who have not.

So the next issue he examines for this fledgling new community

is the faithful use of a disciple's worldly possessions.

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.

Jesus then tells an outrageous story that has some pretty dicey ethics, at best. To say that he is encouraging his hearers to "think outside of the box" is an understatement, but he's trying to illustrate the zeal and determination with which he wants his disciples to choose the Kingdom of God and live in it. And so we get the story of the Shrewd Steward.

As we just heard the parable unfold, a servant is about to be dismissed for wasting his employer's money, neglecting his responsibilities. His future looks very bleak; he's not really trained for any other work. As he ponders the bind he is in, he has a flash of insight and realizes how he can solve his dilemma. Then he makes a decision that has a bearing on his entire future: he reduces the indebtedness of his master's former creditors by giving up his rightful commission, thereby endearing himself to them. He can do this because as a steward he had a right to a percentage of what he collected for his employer. The employer praises the steward, not for his earlier neglect of his duty, but for having the foresight to make a sacrifice now for the sake of what would be needed later on.

The moral of the story is that Jesus wants his hearers to see that the choice before them is of the same magnitude as that of the steward. Their whole future hangs in the balance. Jesus wants them, like the Steward, to be shrewd, daring and willing to sacrifice for the future. This is an all or nothing proposition. His listeners, in fellowship around the table that evening, have already tasted something new in what life can be lived in the presence of Jesus. Now he asks them, "Is this going to be a one night stand or do you see the crucial importance of re-orienting the way you live to the standards and values of God's Kingdom?"

It is very important to see in this parable that Jesus cracks up the old equation of justification. The one that said, if you have lots of stuff, God's blessing is on you and if you don't have anything it's because you've lived an unrighteous life. Jesus neither condemns nor condones having money and possessions. It is the choice we make about serving God, seeking God's Kingdom and its righteousness, that will shape the believers' relationship to their money and possession. We may have a little, we may have lot, just as the people around Jesus' table that night long ago. But regardless of how much we have, we still have to decide how to use it.

Following this parable, the evangelist groups together a variety of sayings of Jesus that probably answer many of the questions that were buzzing in the heads of the people at the party.

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"If I am to give myself completely to God's Kingdom and I am family, kin, in equal status with everyone here, how do I use what I have? "

"If I have lots, what do I give and receive; if I have little, what do I give and receive?"

As Luke frames it here, Jesus seems to say, "Make friends with money!"

In other words, get lots of it.

Go for it, but only so that you can use it, direct it, for God's purposes.

Ask, seek, knock to find out what God wants done with money and then do it!

Make lots for God, spend lots for God.

Don't just skim the surplus, but go the whole hog.

In right stewardship of money we learn God's ways in the here and now in order to take our place as contributors to the uplifting of creation, to be creative and blessed.

In so living now, we taste the eternity that is foundational to the Kingdom and the joy that only fulfilling God's desire can bring.

All throughout these sayings, however, Jesus is clear.

Money is not and can never be the end in itself.

If the end of our working is money alone, without its ultimate use in mind first, we will be shaped - or should I say stunted - by the values that money for money's sake engenders.

Money, when it is a vehicle for God's love, will take us far along our spiritual journey through our interactions of working and giving to those whom God seeks to build up. And for money to be a vehicle, we have to be faithful in our relationship to it.

The money is never ours, it is God's.

We're the stewards.

If we keep the money, thinking it is ours with an occasional tip for God, we are, in fact and in deed, the roadblocks, the impediments, to the Kingdom's presence in the present.

We are servants of an idol.

An idol is anything that takes God's place in our lives and I think there's nothing easier from which to make an idol than money.

We think that what it will do, bring, provide will give us our lives, our happiness, our identity. Wrong.

The end of money that is sought for itself, for myself, alone leads to smallness, not greatness of spirit.

The power of mammon serves itself and sees no wrong, or more aptly put, does not see the suffering of widows and orphans, sinners and outcasts, because they are not a part of the picture of making more mammon.

They exist within a secondary or utterly ancillary field of meaning and purpose that has to do with mammon's leftovers.

"Later, if there is time, I will.."

but the key problem to serving mammon as an end in itself is that, ultimately, it leaves no extra time or energy.

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Mammon is exclusive.
It wants no other company.
Mammon has its own self-corroborating reality and justifications.
Mammon is consumptive.
Mammon is destructive on its own because it demands that we treat others,
our sisters and brothers as Jesus has identified them,
as objects easily sacrificed to the getting of more mammon.
The only way to "tame" mammon is to deprive it of its idol status
and revert it to servant status.
And the only way to do this is to seek first the Kingdom of God,
to commit our life and faith, our identity...and our pocketbook
with as much earnestness as the crafty steward.

We have to choose whom we will serve, we can't serve both.
We can't have the Kingdom of God and the idol of mammon.
Our identity and being is shaped by whom or what we serve.
In one temple, we are the servant who thinks he is the master.
In the other temple, we are family welcomed home
and full partakers of the fruits of our God and Source in Heaven.

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