The Dishonest Manager Luke 16:1-13

What did I just read in today’s Gospel?.......I purposely looked a few of your faces while I was reading……Some of you had perplexed looks on your faces and others were astonished. Is Jesus proposing an unorthodox morality?......How did this parable get into the Bible? Just what can we take away from this story which concludes with Jesus’ commendation of the manager for “acting shrewdly?” I believe there is a disproportionate amount of discussion with very little being conclusive.

With so many hurdles to cross, the dishonest manager story requires a kind of “go with your gut” approach. Possibly we should adopt a faithful course with realistic sincerity, leaning on and learning with the disciples, as Jesus preaches the Gospel. A missionary approach may be required because without it we won’t make much sense of it. There is a Gospel lesson to hear and great wonder to consider in this parable.

There will be those who struggle with this lesson…….there will be hearers who have been faithful with much and those who have been faithful with little. Some who are dishonest with much and some who are dishonest with little. Some who have had debts forgiven and some who have refused to forgive debts. I’m sure there are worshippers who have been fired and there is also someone who has been the boss who did the firing. I’m also sure there will be someone who has been falsely accused and someone who may feel the manager is simply lazy or someone may be bearing false witness against him. Not one of these talking points is superior to the other, however, each point could open the door for preaching about lending practices, debts and debtors, Job loss and job creation, or the divisions which could occur in our communities, churches, and families……Jesus has given us this parable which is more readily accessible than it first appears.

Jesus said, there was once a rich man who had a manager and was told the manager was taking advantage of his position and was running up huge personal debts. He called the manager in, told him he heard what he was doing and fired him, and told him he wanted a complete audit.

The manager was extremely worried, “what am I going to do?” He has lost his job as a manager, He is not strong enough to do manual labor, and he is too proud to beg. “But, ah ha, I have plan. People will take me in when I hit the street.”

He called in all the people who owed his master. He asked the first how much he owed the master and he replied “one hundred jugs of olive oil.” “Sit down here, quickly write, 50 jugs.” He said to the next, “what do you owe?” He said, “one hundred sacks of wheat.” He said, “take your bill and write in eighty sacks.

Now, here is the big surprise…… The master praised the dishonest manager. Why? Because he knew how to take care of himself! Street smart people are wiser in this regard than law abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, and surviving on their wits.

Jesus then said, you need to be smart in the same way……but for what is right……to stimulate your creative survival, concentrating on bare essentials and to not live self-righteously getting by on good behavior. He then made these comments: If you are honest in small things, you will be honest in big things; if you are crooked in small things, you will be crooked in big things, if you are not honest in small jobs, who would put you in charge of the store? No worker can serve two bosses: You will either hate the first and love the second or adore the first and despise the second. You can’t serve both God and the wealth.

This story of the dishonest manager is a bit of a mystery and can leave us puzzled unless we dig just a little deeper. There are some possible explanations for the manager’s actions which Jesus had commended.

1. Over lending then reducing to a reasonable debt. Possibly the

manager had been over lending and charging too much interest so the customers would never be able to pay it back. If so, what he did made good business sense. He simply reduced their bills so the customers were more likely to pay off their debts.

1. He took off the interest. Charging of interest was strictly forbidden for a Jew to do, especially to another Jew, under Old Testament law. To get around the law if one borrowed 400 gallons of olive oil, they would sign a repayment note for 600 gallons. No interest was charged since they borrowed 600 gallons.
2. He took off his cut in the business. It is possible the manager could have been entitled to a cut of the business, so he simply wrote off his cut.

However we look at it, the dishonest manger was just that, a scoundrel. His generosity to the creditors never would have happened if he hadn’t been caught cooking the books. He was lining his own pockets and was not faithful to his master.

So why is Jesus so admiring of the shrewdness of this crooked manager? Keep in mind Jesus said nothing on the morality of the man. The message is clearly stated in today’s Gospel. No servant can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. Matthew 6:19-21, puts it another way. I know many of you have heard this before. Don’t hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or worse, stolen by burglars. Stockpile your treasure in heaven where it is safe from moths, rust, and burglars. For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

Brothers and sisters, people of St John’s, God is looking for open minded Christian people. If we are to be open minded in God’s cause we should spend time with God in prayer. We cannot be Christians unless we have a close relationship to God. That is what prayer is all about….spending time with God…… Many Christians believe we can keep our spiritual lives going with one Sunday service each week.

If we are to be open minded for God, we should be willing to do what is closest to God’s heart. Jesus gave the church one commission in Matthew 28:18-20. “All authority in heaven and earth have been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. Are you willing to put yourself out to tell others about God?

If we are open minded for God do we use the same wisdom in church as we do in our businesses or in the secular world? Some churches have top managers and leaders in attendance, yet when they come to church they leave their brains in their parked cars in the parking lot. If we had used their expertise in the church we could have changed long ago. Please note I said expertise not crookedness. We are all called to have integrity in the way we conduct our affairs.

It is worth recalling this parable was meant for the disciples. It serves primarily as a warning to the church: be careful in the management of the pieces of the kingdom under our care for they are managed at God’s discretion. This parable and its summation are emphatic reminders of the policy to tend the church well through serving neighbors in need, practicing the art of hospitality, celebrating the sacraments, and proclaiming the “good news” of Jesus Christ…… These tasks may seem small but the Savior hints at a greater significance……….. “Whoever is faithful in very little is also faithful in very much.