

Year C Proper 25 The Dishonest Manager

“Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.” These words, spoken by Jesus, are a little unsettling when they are heard by themselves without the rest of the story. Well, actually, these words are a little unsettling even within the context of the story. The master in the story has just complimented his dishonest steward for being “shrewd” and Jesus turns to us and says, “You see that? Take a lesson from that. Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.”

Jesus seems to telling us to go along with the ways of the world – ways that are not in line with the ways of God’s kingdom. But, is he really? Let’s rewind and figure this out together.

A rich man has discovered that his manager, the steward of his property, has been “squandering” it, mismanaging things. We aren’t told the details of this management – it could be a variety of things resulting from ineptitude, deliberate misuse, or even fraudulent activities. Regardless, the manager has been called before his master and hears some dreadfully disturbing words: “Give me an accounting of your management,” the master demands.

Now those words may should cause a little chill to settle in our bones, too. Why? Well, let’s rewind this Story of ours even further – to the beginning. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. God, in fact, created all things. He looked at his creation and he saw that it was good. Then he did something amazingly generous. He entrusted that creation – all of that creation – into our hands. From our fellow humans to the earth we tread, from the animals who share this world to the air we breathe...all of it was handed to us by our Master. “Take good care of my property,” our Master cautions. “Be fruitful, multiply, and be the stewards of my creation.” We were tasked with a huge responsibility. God desires

that all of creation be in perfect relationship with him and with each other. As God's stewards, created in God's image, we were supposed to live into that purpose. And, we know that sooner or later we will be standing in front of our Master hearing those same words that we heard in the Gospel today: "Give me an accounting of your management."

If we fast forward now, from the beginning of our great Story back into the Gospels, we discover that Jesus warns of this eventuality over and over again, especially in stories – stories like the weeds among the wheat (Mat.13:24), the ten bridesmaids (Matt.25:1), the talents (Matt.25:14), the sheep and the goats (Matt.25:31), and so on. These stories always end with a disturbing image of being left in the darkness, or burning, or the weeping and gnashing of teeth. These stories may be a little stressful for us knowing that judgement awaits. "Give me an accounting of your management."

Being God's faithful stewards, striving daily to live into the purpose for which we were created – to be in perfect relationship with God and all of God's creation – feels a little impossible on most days. We are born into a broken world filled with broken people. It is impossible for us not to participate in at least some of this brokenness – we must engage in the world's systems and structures that order our lives, allow us to function in society, and those systems and structures are tainted with systemic inequalities. We operate in a tainted world and we are tainted. Today's story, though, provides us with some reassurance and some advice.

We may look with surprise on the scene before us. The Master has just praised the mismanaging manager who, clearly, is operating out of self-preservation, not goodness. We certainly can take no lesson on moral behaviour from this guy.

Right? But, hang on, there is good reason for the Master to be praising this apparent crook. For the first time in his life, perhaps, he has put aside his greed, his desire for profit, and has placed his neighbours above his lust for cash. In desperation, sure, he turned to human beings ahead of profit but he *has* turned to human beings. These people he has helped out by reducing their bills may even like him, may even respect him a little now.

We still have a hard time approving of this fellow, though, don't we? We know he was doing something nice for others in order to save his own skin. But, let's recall that our Story of Salvation is full of people just like that...Abraham who says that Sarah is his sister so that the Egyptians won't kill him to take her; Jacob who swindles his father-in-law and then runs for the hills; David who desires Bathsheba, and arranges the death of Bathsheba's husband rather than allow him to discover that his wife is pregnant with another man's child; Peter who denies his Lord three times to save his own hide. Our Story is filled with these examples of broken people who get things wrong and yet God forgives them and includes them in his purpose for the world. Broken people fill the pages of Scripture – just like this mismanaging manager – just like us.

Jesus knows we are broken people living in a broken world. All that we do is tainted with brokenness to some degree or another. Perhaps not in exactly the same way as the manager's actions were tainted but tainted nonetheless. We have all – every single one of us – fallen short of the glory of God, as Paul reminds us. It is a constant struggle for every one of us to walk in God's ways. It is not possible yet for us to fully achieve this. One day it will be – when God's kingdom comes on earth as in heaven – but it is not possible for us yet.

God takes our acts, the good and the bad, tainted as they are, and uses them toward the fulfillment of his purpose – building relationships, working toward the time when all things will be in perfect relationship with God and with each other. We must start somewhere. Like the manager in today’s story, we start from a place of brokenness amid the brokenness of the world...and Jesus tells us that’s okay. “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth,” he tells us. Let’s be clear. Jesus is not saying make friends with dishonest money. He is not saying accumulate the wealth of this world. He very clearly tells us today that we absolutely cannot love both money and God. “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.” By means of...that’s an important phrase – and a little knowledge of the Greek is useful here, too. The Greek word that is here translated as “by means of” has the sense of “from out of,” “originating from.” Beginning with – beginning with the dishonest wealth of this world, beginning with the systemically unjust, the systemically oppressive, the tainted structures and people of this world, beginning with these things we do God’s work – we “make friends.” We try to bring goodness out of everything and everyone we encounter just as God has modeled for us throughout Scripture. We build the relationships that must be built to further God’s purpose, to fulfill our role as stewards.

When the dishonest wealth of this world fails – and it will fail...Jesus says the dishonest wealth will eventually be gone – when this wealth fails, it will be the relationships that remain. “Give me an accounting of your management,” the Master says.