

Last summer, our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted to respect the decisions of its congregations about whether or not to call rostered leaders in committed homosexual partnerships, opening the door in some places for GLBT clergy to serve.

This summer, I witnessed firsthand an example of the hemorrhaging resulting from this decision.

A congregation where I worshipped in South Dakota was preparing for a second first vote to leave the ELCA, and the sermon focused on standing up for the truth of the Bible, which occasionally condemns homosexual acts, assuming them to be unnatural.

The Bible also assumes the world is flat with four corners and makes no more provisions for a natural homosexual orientation than it does for internet ethics; it simply doesn't imagine the possibility; it's prosaic and poetic and profound, but it's not *Scientific American*.

We, however, as both scientific and American, cannot help but read it through the only cultural lenses that we have, which are far different than those of the biblical worlds, and so it is no surprise that we have disagreements about what the Bible really says and especially what it really means.

For many, especially those whose partnerships are not personally affected, the church's issue about sexually active GLBT clergy is not about sex at all, but about the authority and the proper interpretation of Scripture.

It is our version of the Scopes trial, with heated, high stakes debate about how to read the Bible.

This is surely exacerbated in our church by a widespread biblical illiteracy, a propensity not to read it at all.

To its credit, the North Carolina synod memorialized our whole church to read Scripture more, a resolution which led to our ongoing Book of Faith Initiative.

You may not have heard of it since we at Resurrection have done little with it.

It has been my experience that there is regrettably little palate here for reading Scripture.

Bible studies are poorly attended, and on Sunday mornings even interrupted by talkative members who sit in the same room at separate tables, unwilling to participate.

When our vision discernment process raised the possibility of spending more time in the biblical word, people argued against it, seeing the Bible either as dusty and irrelevant or a threat to people we love, a weapon in the hands of angry, judgmental enemies.

It is heartbreaking as your pastor to know this; I feel like I did when I was five years old cowering behind my bedroom door, listening to my parents scream at each other, two voices I dearly love unwilling to listen and wanting nothing to do with each other.

I love Scripture and have apparently wasted much of my life studying it--and it was in fact deeper study which opened me up to the possibility of embracing my gay friends when I realized that the Bible is silent about sexual orientation, that it sometimes contradicts itself, that it is neither scientific nor American, and that just like the arc of history bends toward justice, the arc of Scripture bends toward welcome.

These lessons do not come quickly or easily, which may be why we who are spoon-fed instant gratification and easy answers resist the Bible and its messy, difficult questions of us.

It does not bless our self serving agendas or look the other way at our starry-eyed love of money.

It does not underwrite our assumptions or baptize our unexamined beliefs.

It does not reinforce the ways we look at the world or move through it, but challenges them, turns them over and upside down and inside out, and never more so than when Jesus tells a parable.

Among Jesus' verbal rose gardens, today's gospel may be the thickest bramble patch of them all. It is certainly a center cut example of why we cannot read Scripture simply at face value, because without going into too many chapter and verse citations, I'm pretty sure the manager breaks at least one of the ten commandments, and the rich man is no model of virtue either.

It absolutely defies any attempt at tidy explanation or simple moralism, unless you decide that the takeaway is that God wants us all to lie, cheat, and swindle more.

The verses at the end make you think that even Saint Luke himself doesn't know what to make of this story, and there is a long line of nervous preachers throughout history following in his uncertain, tap dancing footsteps.

But God bless Luke for including it and making us contend with it.

For those with the courage to be interested, I have left copies in the narthex of my last two sermons on this text, where I dive headlong into the details and try not to drown.

For now, however, I simply want to state the obvious point that the whole story is wildly unfair, and that, I believe, is why we can name it the gospel, the good news.

It is not a moral lesson on proper business ethics any more than Genesis is a primer on scientific theory.

It is not Jesus telling us what to do or how to live.

It is not moral instruction or motivational speaking.

Jesus knows we have more than enough of that already from other sources.

This parable, like all of Jesus' parables, is a picture of what he names the kingdom of God, which is no way to run a business.

The kingdom of God is unfair, and thank God it is.

If God were fair, we'd all be screwed with a capital F.

God, however, is not fair at all.

God is a rich owner whose affairs are managed by a scoundrel, a sad excuse for a Messiah who was born a bastard in a barn, cavorted with sinners, ate with tax collectors, attracted nimrods for students, broke the law, was executed by the state, and died bloody, ridiculed, abandoned and alone.

The church, long tempted by the sweet simplicity of fairness and the idolatry of moralism, has not only sold out the Bible as a rulebook and clergy as referees, but has also betrayed Jesus by prettying him up and turning him into a perfect moral teacher, with an airbrushed mullet, a high school quarterback smile and a look of pure, sweet innocence in his dreamy blue Swedish eyes.

With most of the other disciples, we have turned our back on the blood-soaked Jew on the cross who is cutting God's losses to get us out of the hole.

You know who is missing from Jesus' story?

Two characters: the guy who has no debt at all, and the guy who has debt but says, "no thank you, I'd rather wait and pay full price."

They aren't in the story because they aren't in the kingdom of God: the first doesn't exist and the second can't afford to get in.

That's why God allows hell to stay in business; some people insist on fairness and they need a place to go.

Some people care more about the bottom line and the balance sheet than the borrower and the beggar, but God cares more about people than profits.

That's why you cannot serve God and mammon; you have to pick one and put up with the other.

That is also why God thunders judgment through Amos against those who exploit the poor, the needy and the vulnerable for financial gain...they are people, and people are more important than money...at the same time that Jesus shares the joy of a rich owner who commends his fired manager for cleverly losing him money...because the manager made friends, which are far more valuable than any priceable commodity.

When the money runs out, not if, but when, all we are left with are eternal homes and the dirty people with dirty hands from dirty money that live there.

Money is dirty, even when it is laundered, even when it is honestly earned, even when it is in the offering plate.

The issue is not keeping our hands clean--if Jesus did that there would be no cross and no hope--but the people-centered purposes for which our soiled hands work in the mix of a deeply soiled system.

Jesus opened his, in welcome, and pleads with those same soiled hands for us sinners who owe more than we can ever pay.

And God commends him for it and honors his lowball, cut rate deals.

The eternal homes, therefore, are full of squanderers and swindlers, crooks and criminals and questionable characters of every shade, including the crucified and risen Lord they all celebrate.

If you care about standards and who you're seen with, if you prize integrity and want everyone to get a fair shake, if you believe in earning your way or getting what you deserve, if you think there's a meaningful difference between 50 this and 80 that, then the kingdom of God is not for you.

If you value value, and you prefer the consistency of rules and good order, close the Bible, study accounting, serve Mammon and save up for a time share in hell.

It's much simpler and it will keep you in respectable company and out of trouble.

But if you open the Bible, beware, because it will open you, and things will get messy.

As messy as real life.

As messy as Jesus on the cross.

As messy as eternal life.

What you say is shaped by your audience, and by your context.

You speak very differently to your stakeholders than to your spouse, to your best friend than to the media.

You speak very differently in the courtroom than at the bar, in the board meeting than in the parking lot afterward.

It's the natural course of things for attentive human beings, like Jesus.

Today it is our privilege to overhear him tell perhaps his most disturbing parable, and to hear it well we should consider his audience, and his context.

He is speaking to the disciples.

He has turned from addressing the scribes and Pharisees and sinners and tax collectors--the mixed crowds--to his inner circle of closest friends and followers.

This is a private, not a public parable, and I am tempted to begin preaching it by inviting some of the crowds to leave.

The hero is a scoundrel, and there is no obvious moral lesson, unless it is "be more shrewd and self-interested," which is not something I want to say to the kids, or the visitors, or the guests from Holy Family, or the Ethics and Policy Committee, and certainly not to the offering counters and church treasurer.

If you all decide to get up and walk out, I won't take it personally.

If you decide to stay, understand that Jesus is talking with his closest confidants, and remember that at the moment, he is on a roll.

In the last chapter and a half of Luke's gospel, he has ruined a Pharisees' dinner party, invited everyone to take up their cross and follow him, and told three parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son, and the losers who look for them.

These sayings are just familiar enough to us that we may have worn smooth their jagged edges and fail to feel their sharp prick, fail to really get the point.

Jesus instructs the Pharisee to shift from lunches with buddies to banquets for the poor, the blind, the crippled, and the lame, who are not only unable to reciprocate, but disqualified by their blemishes to serve as priests--those assumed to be God's rejects, too.

Same is true for the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus was holding court, and when the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, Jesus triple stabbed them with three piercing parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son.

Jesus portrays the Pharisees' righteous God as an irresponsible shepherd, a joyful woman, and a shameful doormat of a man who treats the runaway idiot who squanders half his life with better than equal kindness to his righteous, responsible son.

Jesus has been exploding open the most basic assumptions about who God is and how God works, suggesting with scandalizing clarity that God apparently has no moral or sensible standards whatsoever.

And now, because surely they are scratching their heads too, Jesus turns to the disciples and lays on them the prickly story the Christian tradition has come to call the parable of the unjust steward.

Here, late at night over a glass of wine with the reign of God mischievously afire in his eyes, Jesus is now also going to blow to thy kingdom come his disciples' wider but still too narrow assumptions about the concerns and social circles of God.

Fresh off the prodigal son, he is at his storytelling best.

*There was a rich man*, Jesus begins, and the disciples don't like him already, and Jesus quickly builds their dislike with the tale of his unsubstantiated dismissal of his manager. As their sympathy for the down-sized mounts, he pulls the narrative rug out from under his disciples, turning the victim into a pathetic prima donna who refuses to do an honest day's shoveling.

This fellow then turns around and cleverly cheats his former master, quickly using the authority he no longer officially has (though he doesn't mention that to the clients) to discount debts on profits that aren't his.

The turn is so startling that I've never once heard this called the parable of the unfair owner. The shrewd manager is sticking it to the Man who unfairly stuck it to him, and it makes for great late night at the watering hole entertainment, this three ring joke in which everyone gets screwed, including the guy who had to pay eighty instead of only fifty, until Jesus whips out the punchline like a knife:

*And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.*

*And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.*

If you hear it in Greek, it sounds even more stunning:

*And the Lord commended the manager of unrighteousness because he had acted prudently or shrewdly...*

Is "the Lord" the master in the parable, or it is Jesus, as it often is in Luke, or is it a play on words suggesting both?

And what if we consider the sly hero of our story not simply a dishonest manager, but a manager of unrighteousness?

Doesn't that make him anyone who traffics through our corporate world, just like all the disciples gathered to listen to Jesus in this house of worship, putting our tainted money in the offering plate?

I'm not saying that you didn't earn it, or that you cheated at work, but I know at least that the money I put in the plate comes from my employer, Resurrection Lutheran Church, which is full of shrewd sinners and people who earn dishonest money, even if they themselves are earning it honestly.

There is all kinds of unrighteousness, monetary, behavioral and otherwise, which it is our calling as disciples to manage, and children of the light tend to stub their toes and lose their way in the dark.

And Jesus tells us all to learn from those who operate in the shadows, because whether they know it or not, whether we like it or not, God is at work among them too.

The God of the poor, the lame, the blind, the crippled, the lost, the sinful, and the wasteful is also the God of the shrewd manager who is driven by self-interest and unrestrained by fiscal ethics, and we, the shocked, horrified, officially pious disciples can learn something by making of him our hero.

We can look at his dealings and see our own calling in the reign of God.

Part of that calling is prudent management, shrewd stewardship: to use wealth that is not ours to make friends.

We are the managers of God's resources, and someday our jobs will be taken away without our consent, without a hearing, and God will ask for an accounting of the work of our taken lives.

If we say to God, "we cut your losses; we went around forgiving people and telling them to give you what they can, less than what they owe, in unequal amounts, but something at least," then surprise, God will commend us.

Yes, we are squandering God's rightful property, but that's not what God cares about.

God actually cares more about the client than the bill; God cares more about the relationship than the payment.

God, remember, is the shepherd who leaves 99 for one, wastes the fatted calf on the prodigal, and wastes the only begotten son on the sorry likes of us.

God is not looking for a reasonable return on investment.

God's pleasure with our management performance does not depend on the wealth we collect, because wealth doesn't run God's life or establish God's values, and Jesus says therefore, it shouldn't shape ours, either.

Jesus tells us to make money serve us because otherwise, we serve money, and then we lose more than our jobs: we lose ourselves, which is what God really values.

Imagine what it would be like if we spent as much effort making friends as we do balancing budgets.

What if we redirected all the money we spent on accountants and audits into social service?

What if we trusted that God really does have enough--and believed that all the wealth that passes through our hands is really God's and not ours--that we could reverse our habits to become cavalier with the cash and careful with people?

Maybe then, when our management is taken away from us, and we show up at the eternal homes to find sinners, tax collectors, cheats, crooks and criminals--like Jesus--instead of grumbling we can celebrate, and instead of being offended, we can delight in the welcome of our friends.

+ + +

16 Pentecost  
Luke 16:1-13

19 September 2004

As many of you know, I have gone back to school this year.

I entered a doctor of ministry program in preaching here in Chicago, and I chose this particular program in large part because it is designed for pastors active in congregations, and it requires the congregation to participate.

A group of folks from Resurrection, spanning in age from their teens to their eighties, works with me on reading Scripture, preparing sermons, and reviewing the videotapes of sermons I've preached.

The first videotaped sermon was last week, and Resurrection folks are already hard at it

and bearing rich fruit.

I'll spare you all the feedback on last week's sermon -- the feedback was better than the sermon, and took longer -- but there was one excellent piece of feedback that I want to share with you.

When asked what was different about last week's sermon from other sermons I've preached, Nathaniel Viets Van Lear, aged fifteen, said that for him, last week's sermon was unusually clear.

It was easier to follow than many of my other sermons, he said, and the point really got across...you know, whatever the point was.

If Nathaniel is right ... if clear and understandable are good ... then Jesus might just flunk out of my program this week.

It may be that there are so many gaps between what Jesus said and what we read... it may be that since we don't hear Jesus' tone of voice, and we have written words from Luke instead of spoken words from Jesus, and they have been translated several times and several years over... it may be that there are too many bridges to cross between now and then for us to get what Jesus is saying.

It may be, however, that Jesus is entirely clear, and that our struggle with this parable is not what we don't hear from Jesus, but what we do.

*And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.*

*The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.*

*Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth.*

The word of the Lord.

This parable is disturbing for many reasons, not the least of which is the obvious point that Jesus is putting some rather reprehensible business ethics in a positive light. The master in the parable, also called "lord," as in *holy holy holy Lord*, or landlord, or perhaps slumlord, dismisses the manager without giving him a chance to defend himself.

The manager, caught in a swirl of hearsay and injustice, turns out to be a sissy who won't work for an honest buck, and, in a flurry of desperate self-interest, proceeds to cheat the lord who cheated him...and get praised for it.

It makes no sense, or perhaps perfect sense, but not coming from Jesus.

We have higher standards and ethical expectations for Him.

This raises the more subtle concern that just like last week, Jesus is hanging out with sinners and tax collectors again.

Why does Jesus have characters like this in his stories, or in his company at all, much less as heroes?

Why is he encouraging his disciples to be more like the children of this age, and is he really encouraging us to be more like the manager: more lazy, more proud, more self-centered, more dishonest, more shrewd?

How do we teach this parable in Sunday School?

Is Jesus telling us to work the system, cut our losses, and kiss the most strategic behinds so that when the money runs out, the friends we made by means of dishonest wealth will welcome us into the eternal homes?

Are the bouncers in heaven all crooks and clients of absentee slumlords who won't let us in if they don't recognize us from somewhere we told the kids never to go?

And how is a pastor supposed to celebrate and install a justice and social ministry team with a gospel like this?

Nathaniel, I apologize if you're confused: I'm confused too.

But even more than confused, I'm disturbed.

I'm disturbed by Jesus' cavalier treatment of right and wrong, of good and bad.

I'm disturbed by Jesus' preference for the children of this age over the children of the light.

I'm disturbed by the fact that no matter which way I twist and turn this parable, it ends up twisting and turning me, and leaving me with more questions than answers.

Typical Jesus.

Confusion and disturbance, however, are no excuse for failure to deal with this story, and on this Sunday that the Justice and Social Ministry Team is highlighted, this is the word of the Lord.

And there is plenty that the Lord is saying.

Biblical scholar Sharon Ringe presents this parable in the context of a larger system of absentee landlords and accumulated debts, an inequitable system in which rich and poor are separated and the greedy practices decried by the prophet Amos are commonplace status quo.

Ringe argues that "by reducing the amount owed by the (obviously poorer) debtors to the rich man, the manager is doing justice--a way of doing his job as a "manager of injustice" that no longer aims at perpetuating and even adding to old inequities, but instead reflects the new 'economy' of which Jesus is the herald."

"For the disciples," Ringe continues, "this parable provides a 'management model' for their role as leaders.

"Instead of urging upon them a lifestyle or even an ideal of poverty, or advice to keep themselves pure from contamination by wealth, it challenges them to manage wealth in the direction of justice."

That's a good challenge for our justice and social ministry team, and for all of us whose worship includes a time of offering.

There's another challenge here, too, and that is to break out of our pious, religious idealism into the dirty, rough-and-tumble, cut-your-losses, ethically treacherous world which God continues to love and in which God continues to act.

The late Mike Yaconelli writes of a conversation he had with Jesus, in which he asks:  
*but aren't Christians supposed to be nice?*

Jesus replies:

*You think I died on a cross to make people nice? You think I want to be relegated to the status of motivational speaker? Listen, I don't even like football, and I definitely don't like nice people. Look at my disciples! Talk about loud,*

*obnoxious, rude, flaky--hey, these guys were anything but nice.*

*Start telling parents that their sons and daughters should take a year after high school and do missions in South Africa and see how long you last. Tell them it isn't a good decision to make their kids go to soccer camp instead of church camp and see how supportive they'll be. Truth is, I came to ruin people's lives-- just like I ruined yours. I came to turn people's lives upside down. Remember all that stuff I said about being a sword and turning parents against children? I wasn't kidding."*

It may be that what is finally so disturbing about this parable is that it shows us not how we are supposed to be, but how in fact we are.

We are powerful lords of our own little worlds that expect more from people than they can reasonably provide us.

We are smarmy, second-rate managers who are too proud to beg, too weak to dig, too vain to change our lifestyles, and too ready to cut someone else's losses to cover our own hides.

We are debtors who cannot repay God or Visa what we owe them, and we would jump at the chance to have the bill reduced and the feeling of liberation that comes from not owing anything to anyone anymore, whether that's money or favors or basic kindness.

We are flawed characters in a flawed system, living a deeply flawed story in a deeply flawed world.

And at the end of our story, the master who has heard terrible things about us will ask us to turn in an account of our management.

We will show God exactly how much and where we ripped God off and sold God out. And God will commend us for a job well done.

We will be welcomed by all the other losers into the eternal homes, including the crook on the cross through whom God has saved this otherwise hopeless world.

We may question God's standards, of course, but God will turn around and question ours. The debtor means more to God than the debt; the person means more than the money.

God would rather fill the eternal homes with rotten people than with nice furniture, so heaven may not be up to our standards and expectations.

And God, who will not throw anyone out, has no problem throwing out our standards, or our management, or for that matter, our money and our market-driven values.

When we discussed this parable at our Wednesday night Bible study this past week, Jim Crandall said,

"I think God's saying that it's okay to play fast and loose with money, but not with people."

A+