

A STEWARDSHIP OF INJUSTICE

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Text: Luke 16: 1-8

I stand in a long line of wonderful deans who have served PSR with distinction, people like Del Brown, whose passing we are all mourning today, and Mary Donovan Turner, who is taking a well-deserved sabbatical this year, but I must say, somewhat ironically, that I never wanted to be a dean myself. I have always thought of deans as quintessential middle managers, with the president, Board, and senior staff on one side and the faculty, students, and support staff on the other. I have always thought that being a dean is an impossible job, and now I can say with confidence that IT IS. So, in trying to find a way forward, I looked as I often do for help in the Bible (well, I am really a New Testament scholar and that shows). But finding guidance for middle managers in scripture is not so easy. As I thought about it, however, one scriptural text came clearly to mind: Luke 16: 1-8, the story of the *oikonomos*, the household manager, the scripture you just heard read.

What a strange little parable it is with a real twist at the end: “And the Lord (Master; *ho kyrios*) commended the dishonest steward because he acted wisely (thoughtfully, prudently; *phronimos*---from *phroneo*, to think, to have in mind, to care about)” (Luke 16:8). Why would you commend as wise someone you believed to be dishonest, for initiating even greater acts of dishonesty? And who is doing the commending here, who is the *kyrios* being referred to in this verse? There are several options: it could be Jesus, who is telling this parable to his disciples; it could be the steward’s master, who is being cheated; or it could possibly even be God, who is sometimes in Luke referred to as *ho kyrios*, the

Lord. Which one of those would commend this steward, this household manager, for his thoughtful, though strikingly dishonest, actions and why?

This parable is nothing but trouble, and I love it precisely because of the trouble it causes. It is troubling not only because it is a challenge to interpretation, evidently going back as far as the tradition prior to Luke, which loaded up the ending of the parable with a variety of disparate sayings about money, in the hope that such a context would make some sense out of this odd teaching on the benefits of dishonesty. But I also love this parable because it blocks our easy piety, so often on display when we read or speak about scripture. The parable of the Unjust Steward, as it is traditionally called, does not come out of the world of heavenly visions, rustling wings, soft focus purity, and simple judgments; instead, it comes out of our real world, the one we live in day by day, the world of shame, moral ambiguity, sweat, injustice, and pain. In my view, this is a parable that brings the fantasy of imagined religion back down to the earthly reality of lived religion. And, of course, as St. Augustine noted centuries ago, challenging biblical texts are just plain fun to work with (yes, Charlotte, biblical exegesis can indeed be fun!). So, let's face the challenge.

How might we interpret the parable of the Unjust Steward today? Could it have anything to say to our lived reality? Well, as you may have already guessed, I think so. I find my interpretive key to this odd little story in the last verse, verse 8, which I read at the beginning: the master/lord, whoever we think that might be, commends the unjust or dishonest steward for his wise or prudent or thoughtful actions. Calling the steward, who is the household manager, the "unjust steward" is a perfectly acceptable English translation of the Greek phrase "*oikonomon tes adikias*" but it is not a literal translation of that phrase. Instead of an adjective modifying a noun, as the English "unjust steward" has it, in the Greek text itself the noun "steward" is modified by another noun in the genitive case; so, literally, in Greek the phrase is "steward of injustice." The *kyrios* is commending a steward

of injustice. That Greek way of describing the unnamed hero (or anti-hero) of this story got me thinking through the parable again, asking a different kind of question about what was going on. Could there be, I asked myself, some kind of stewardship of injustice, some form of proper management for bad choices? And if so, what would that mean?

We all like to think—and religious people particularly like to think—that there is a right answer or a completely loving, just, and good action for every situation we find ourselves facing in the world. Our only task, and it can be daunting sometimes, is to find that right answer or purely good action amid all the lesser options available. However, as I have gotten older and watched more people, including myself, struggling through all of life's crises and transitions, I have come to believe that, more often than not, there is no "right" answer, no perfectly good course of action for every situation, only a series of less than ideal choices, in which there are always casualties and unintended consequences. For example, we may have good and important reasons for breaking up a relationship or a marriage; it may be the most healthy and loving thing to do for ourselves and others, but it can devastate the other person or persons involved. And if we stay in the relationship for the sake of the other person, we may be jeopardizing our own growth and spiritual well-being for the other. Is there a way to "do no harm" in this scenario? Or what about the choice to have an abortion? Is that choice ever made without regret and pain? But what about the pain of going through with the pregnancy---loss of money, time, friends, danger to health and putting a family's well-being at risk? Where is the "do no harm" solution, much less the wholly "right, good, and loving" solution? Over and over again in most of the serious decisions we must make throughout our lives, we often face, not a right way and a wrong way, but instead an array of bad alternatives. Life is not simple; it is deeply, inherently colored by a profound ambiguity.

I am not a moral purist; at times I would like to be, but I don't know how to be. I don't know how one can be a moral purist and actually live in this world. I think one would have to be either delusional or hypocritical to believe that your actions are always good, pure and loving. Life is too messy; situations are often very unclear even when we actually know all the facts, much less when we don't. I admit to having some admiration for the ideological or moral purists who find a way to pull out of this world enough to pursue their visions of the holy and the good, the true saints among us, but I have never had the courage or the ingenuity to figure out how to do that. I think they must sleep better at night than those of us who rehearse and rehearse again the things we have done or said to see if we could have done it with less "collateral damage" than we did.

More difficult still, in a world in which practically every choice, every decision has a "down side," a negative "underbelly," how do we decide what to do? If there is no totally "right" choice, what path do we choose? Do we put all the alternatives on the wall, blindfold ourselves, and throw a dart? When I was growing up, I was told that if I needed an answer to a pressing question, all I had to do was hold the Bible to my heart, ask my question, and then with my eyes closed, open the Bible and point my finger at a place on the page: there would be my answer. I actually tried that method a few times when I was younger, but I don't recommend it because it takes more interpretive ability than I have to figure out how "a people is coming from the north country" is an answer to whether or not I should smoke. So, how do we make choices when all our choices have negative impacts, when we can see no "right" way to go? Are there guidelines for sorting out various less-than-ideal choices? Is there a Christian method of managing unjust ends? As the parable puts it: is it possible to become stewards of injustice?

In the parable, the steward was facing a devastating crisis: he was to be removed from his position because of rumors of dishonest behavior. The parable does not

tell us whether or not these rumors were true; all we know is that his master is going to act on them. Once the crisis arrives, the steward must decide how to respond: As Luke tells us, “and the steward said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the household management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and to beg would shame me. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the household management.’ So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, “Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’...” and so he goes on to the second debtor in the same fashion and all the others. What did he do that deserves commendation for its wisdom or thoughtfulness? What did he do that demonstrates his careful management of injustice?

Every course of action the steward considers as a possible option for himself has a strong down side: physical labor requires strength, which he lacks; begging would bring shame to him and his entire family, causing potentially serious harm, according to the ancient honor/shame system, to everyone related to him, including future unborn generations. Instead of these options, he decides to reduce the debt load of his master’s debtors, giving them a much-needed break in order to earn their later care for him. He uses his power, soon to be taken away, to become their generous patron, forgiving a large part of each one’s debt. By accepting his offer of patronage, they become his clients, pledged to help him out in turn when his fortunes fall, as he knows they soon will. It is a very interesting action because his “unjust” plan actually does a great deal of good for many people who desperately need help. Indeed, as one commentator has noted, in his unjust action toward his master, the steward acts with great charity towards the poor who are indebted to his master. Such charitable acts within Judaism were highly praised. When we analyze the parable this way, it does appear that the steward has exerted

careful management over his various unjust options and is, perhaps, quite rightly commended for his wise and thoughtful response to a terrible personal crisis.

What was wise about the steward's actions arises not only from what he eventually did but also from how he went about deciding on that response. The process of his decision-making was as wise as the final decision itself. Consider what he did: In the first place, the steward took time to think through all of his options; he did not jump to the first response that came to his mind. Even with only bad options, one must take time to consider each one carefully; they are not the same; they have different positives and negatives. Second, he was totally honest with himself about what he could and could not do. In making any decision, careful and honest self-assessment is a requirement. If there is something you cannot do emotionally, physically, or spiritually, there is no point in considering that action as a true option for you, regardless of what others may say or do. Third, the steward acted decisively. When difficult decisions loom, avoiding making any decision at all can often be the most seductive option, and it almost always results in the very worst possible outcome. You must act, even when you know your actions will hurt some or have negative outcomes for others. Not to act is to participate in moral cowardice. Finally, the option that the steward chose was one that did the greatest good for the most and the least harm to the fewest. He maximized the positive effects of his actions and minimized the negative ones. What he did still had negative effects, even for him (he was after all confirming the rumors about his dishonesty, but since those rumors had already spread, his actions did nothing new to his reputation or to his master's view of him). His rich master was out some (but not all) of the oil and grain that were due to him, but the much more needy debtors were given hefty relief from the burdens of what they owed. And in the end, their gratitude to the steward for his generosity to them would secure a new house for him when he was put out of his household management position.

For me this parable provides real guidance for making decisions in the ambiguous world in which all of us routinely live, where the good, the pure, and the right are attractive ideals but rarely actual options for action or decision. It is a comfort to me to think that God not only forgives my stupidities and failures, but that God may also actually commend my acts of practical wisdom, which always have down sides and often carry hurt to some. What makes deciding among bad options, as we are so often required to do, commendable, at least as the Steward of Injustice suggests it to us, is to think carefully through our options, be brutally honest in our self-assessment, act decisively, and do the most good and the least harm we possibly can.

Not only do we need to practice good stewardship—good management—over our assets, we also need to practice good management over the many negative options we face in decision-making every day. No school runs well without the constant use of such practical wisdom; no church does either. It is messy? Yes. Is it morally pure? No. It is necessary? Always. Does God commend us when we do our best with bad choices? Thankfully, along with the Steward of Injustice, we can say, “yes.”