



“Beyond the Field of Right and Wrong”

This morning’s parable has got to be one of the strangest and most difficult to understand. As a moral lesson, it fails abysmally. An employee steals from his employer and ends up being *praised* for his shrewdness. As a cautionary tale about the cost of bad behavior, it fails for the same reason – dishonesty apparently pays. The author of Luke’s gospel and subsequent generations clearly were scratching their heads to wrest from it some moral lesson and, in my opinion, crash and burn in their attempt.

Editors tacked on the last four verses in an attempt to attach some redemptive moral teaching to it. These verses are certainly not Jesus’ own interpretations. The parable itself ends at verse 8: the employer who has been ripped off by his employee praises him for his shrewd business practices – practices that cost the employer even more money. The employee goes his to clients and collects only half of what they owe, so that when his boss fires him, these clients will be inclined to employ him. The guy is taking care of his own butt all the way down the line – a tactic *appreciated*, not condemned by his boss.

Then come the interpretations: Whoever is faithful in very little is faithful in very much. But he *wasn’t* faithful and he benefited. Next. If you

can’t be faithful with dishonest wealth, who is going to entrust you with true riches? But in the end there’s no negative judgment of the employee’s methods. Next. If you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? Again, this implies moral judgment by the employer, which isn’t part of the story. Next. No slave can serve two masters...you cannot serve both God and wealth. This is a non sequitur. It’s an imported wisdom saying that simply doesn’t fit. I repeat. These don’t come from Jesus. They are editorial attempts to moralize what was never intended to be a moral lesson.

We must look elsewhere for this parable’s meaning. It’s meaning, I suggest, is trans-moral – that is, it’s meaning lies beyond morality. The 12th century Sufi mystic, Rumi, wrote:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and
rightdoing
there is a field.
I’ll meet you there.

This is a field of sacred awareness – of simply being in God. Actions that flow from it will be holy, not through an effort of will, but as a natural expression of the sweetness of dwelling in this field. For the rest of us, there is morality – a willful reigning in of those impulses and desires that

originate in other fields, where the ego makes a name for itself by whatever means. It is a necessary willful exertion of moral will, because not many of us know about this field beyond wrongdoing and rightdoing. The church has established itself primarily within the field of wrongdoing and rightdoing. Most people assume that this is the church's job – to teach moral values and do its part in keeping us from killing each other. Jesus dwelled within the field *beyond* wrongdoing and rightdoing. This didn't make him anti-morality. It didn't make him an anarchist. It's just that from time to time he told parables from a different field of consciousness. Then, when the church came to interpret these parables, it interprets them from a moral perspective.

So for just one moment, let's enter that other field together and explore the meaning of the parable. It is a story about a man who acts boldly and resolutely in the face of a crisis. First, he recognizes that he's facing a crisis. Then he makes a realistic assessment of his own capacities – he's too old to dig ditches and too proud to beg. Finally, he comes up with a strategic plan. He is not about to roll over and die, or play the victim of circumstances. He has to think on his feet and act decisively. At the end of the day, his employer recognizes and praises these skills. It's probably what caused him to hire the man in the first place.

In a nutshell, I hear Jesus saying to his listeners: Here's a story about a man who operates from an egocentric

value system. He displays exceptional ingenuity and shrewdness. Yes, he's dishonest, but this is not the point. When you are playing in the field of the ego, it's inevitable. But *you*, who dwell in divine fields, where is your own ingenuity, and boldness of action? Where is your holy shrewdness to match the profane shrewdness of the world? Why do you act like victims of fate, when this shadowy character takes fate by the throat and makes it work to his advantage? What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for God to come down out of the sky and make it all better? But don't you see? You *are* the heart of God. Do you not know this? You *are* the dream of God? Why did you think otherwise? You *are* the hands of God, the only hands God has to fashion a world that mirrors this divine field.

The best interpretation is embedded in the parable itself. "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light"(Luke 16:8). They are doing a better job of planning for the next war, strategizing for the next huge profit, lobbying to get a leg up on the competition, creating policy to perpetuate their own wealth. The ideologues are getting buy-in for their preferred narratives about the meaning of life: they are getting our children to buy in to the narrative of consumerism; they are getting adults to organize their lives around an economic story; they are getting our young adults to buy in to the narrative of celebrity. They are doing what's in their own best interest and doing it

well. They aren't evil. No sinister motives need be attributed to their actions. From within their field of consciousness, they are simply taking care of business. What about those who dwell in Christ consciousness, who claim to be his heart and mind in the world? Are we taking care of *our* business?

I see this parable as a call to bold and resolute action. Let's just take it at the level of the mainline Christian church – us guys! The public has metaphorically fired us. For many reasons, some wrong and others right, the public has determined that we've squandered the sacred treasure and are no longer fit to be stewards of the Holy One's affairs. Those still interested in spirituality are fleeing to the mountains and the forests, or to Buddhist Temples or the sanctuary of a yoga studio. Others pursue their spiritual interests in the privacy of their own lives, in their own way, and don't need "the church".

Most hear the word "church" and an iron curtain falls over their minds and hearts. They associate church with moral judgment and wild-eyed preachers telling them what to believe or perish; or they conjure up images of smooth-as-silk evangelists soft-pedaling their gospel message until you make a join – then comes the velvet hammer crashing down on all those souls who don't believe what they believe. John Q. Public has heard it all and seen it all and wants no part of it. Perhaps, they'll show up at a Christmas Eve service for nostalgic reasons, but that's enough. We might

protest that *we're* different; we're not like those guys - but it's a distinction lost on the public. We're in line to be fired. We've already been laid off. Many churches in Europe are now museums or condos or state offices. Can Canadian churches be far behind?

So, what are we to do? As we've seen, the guy in the parable first *recognized* the crisis; then made a *realistic assessment* of his capacities; finally, he comes up with a *strategic plan*.

Crisis

The mainline church in B.C. recognized the crisis before most of Canada. Thirty-seven percent of the population in Vancouver never attends a religious service. That's the highest percentage in all of North America. Sadly, many churches are still shuffling the deck chairs while the cruise ship *Mother Church* is going down. If we did recognize the crisis, we would be calling for all hands on deck and putting in place procedures for an emergency evacuation. Maybe the church as we've know it needs to sink. Stan Roger's sings a song about the Mary Ellen Carter going down, but he dreams of a day when she will "rise again".

I was preaching at a church in Toronto this past summer, on the subject of ecological destruction and the Christian faith. This happened to be the one Sunday of the year when they tested the fire alarms in the church. Five minutes after I delivered the sermon, the alarm went off and everybody left the church. I called my

sermon *This Is Not A Drill* The survival of the church pales in comparison with the survival of our planet. But both seem inevitable if we cannot recognize that we're in critical condition.

Assessment

The dishonest manager didn't collapse. He didn't take a victim stance. He looked within and garnered all his wits – even if they were less than noble wits – and decided that he had one last chance and he intended to take it. In Exodus, Moses is leading his people out of captivity. He arrives at the point when they can all glimpse the Promised Land. And he says to them, “Today I put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, therefore, that you may live.” The church must make a decision that it's going to rally all of its wits and shrewdness and decide whether it wants to live and be a blessing to the world.

Strategy

Here's my strategy. *Forget strategy.* Realize that “Church” is just the name we give to the collective energy and intentions of a group of people who want to go deep in Christ. No fire can destroy it and no storm can sink this church. It lives within the hearts of each of us. National programs to attract newcomers, marketing strategies from local congregations, fancy worship services, great sermons, fabulous music – all of these are great. But if they are merely a part of a strategy to put bums in the pews and

cover the annual budget, they are destined to fail. On the other hand, if they are a manifestation of our joy in dwelling in the field of the Holy One, a sign that we are drinking deeply of the cup that Christ drank from, an expression of our love of one another and of the Spirit, it changes everything.

The dishonest steward took care of his business, and we need to take care of our business – which is fundamentally helping people to *experience* the Holy One. Our business is leading people to the field of the Holy One. We look *through* Jesus life, death, and resurrection and we see the light of God. In the same way, Buddhists look through the life of the Buddha. Indians may look through Krishna and see the light. We help people to look *through* creation in all its magnificence and see the light of God. We help you to look *at* your own life as a sacred field where the Holy One is calling you to come out and play.

We need to be helping people to shine with the presence of Christ, at work, in their relationships, as they advocate on behalf of the marginalized for justice and on behalf of our non-human kin in creation. We need to be teaching you to be leaders – rising up psychologically and spiritual sound disciples who are not afraid to let their light shine and be the blessing you are meant to be. We need to be bold. We have ceded the gospel of Christ to literalists and ideologues that divide the world up into “us” and “them” – and try to pretend that they are full of love and compassion. It's time for openhearted, open-minded Christians

to take back the gospel. Take it back and let public know that there is a spiritual alternative to homophobia, and sexism, and pre-scientific worldviews. We need to proclaim from the rooftops and the radio and TV stations that we're here to listen – not preach; to love – not condemn; to offer ever-expanding perspectives on Truth – and never the Infallible Truth.

If we want a strategy, let it be an inside-out strategy. Let's stop *talking about* transforming the world out there and attend to our own spiritual transformation. This is the only viable strategy for the church. Let's get our hearts and mind in Christ, and then we'll have the power and the right attitude from which to help transform our world.

Ask yourself if you're growing in Christ? If we're not helping you do that, then we're failing you. Demand it of your faith community. Let's start taking care of each other in our communities of faith and *then* extend this care to the world. If our own are hungry, lonely, depressed and they remain invisible to us, what kind of a witness is that to the world? It's not that we turn inward and insulate ourselves – it's that we offer to the world *only* what we know ourselves. If we're not loving the person sitting beside us, what do we have to give to the world?

The boldest action you may ever take is coming up to receive the bread and cup of life this morning. To receive it with an open heart is to enter the field where the Holy *One* dwells. This can change everything.