

**Sermon for September 18,2016**  
**Luke 16:1-13**

I think that what I'm about to say; most of you will agree with—after reading today's Gospel the phrase, "The Lord works in mysterious ways" came to mind. If you can't make sense out of what Jesus is saying in our reading today; you're not alone. Other pastors, seminary professors, and commentary writers don't understand everything that Jesus is saying when we read all of this passage!

So let's look at the facts as we know them. We start with two characters, the rich man and his manager. It has been brought to the rich man's attention that his manager has been lining his pockets with money that belongs to the rich man. So the rich man calls the manager to his office and gives him a talking to and tells him to get the books in order because he's going to be fired.

Well now the manager is almost having a panic attack. He knows he isn't strong enough to do physical labor and he's too proud to beg for his keep. So he comes up with this ingenious plan to have friends to take care of him when he's lost his job. He goes to his boss' clients and has them reduce what they owe the rich man thereby building a relationship with them and makes the rich man look really good in their eyes. The rich man goes from someone who has corrupt managers working for him to being someone who is generous with his clients.

Now you and I might think that the rich man would be upset that the manager had again cheated him out of more money and would be punished. But no, Jesus tells us, "The 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 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."

And that's where most of us get lost! These words don't seem to match the behavior that Jesus usually asks of us. But before our confusion turns to panic, there is hope. One thing we

need to remember is that parables are meant to be confusing—usually not this confusing! Parables are meant to turn the conventional wisdom of the day on its head and upside down leaving the listeners praying for guidance. But Jesus hasn't left us without resources as he's told us other stories like this one and we can do what Martin Luther taught when we come up against a difficult passage—we use other Scripture to interpret Scripture.

So let's look at the parable again. Just what has the manager done that is unethical or wrong? He has forgiven the clients debts. Sound familiar? Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. So we can see this parable as being about forgiveness. But if Jesus wanted this parable to be about forgiveness why didn't he just come out and say, "There was a rich man who had a lot of people owing him a lot of money. He forgave them a substantial amount of their debt and they all lived happily ever after."

All nice and easy to understand, but it's the nature of our God to not let us get away with easy answers. Why? Because our lives don't have easy answers. Jesus doesn't tell us simple stories because our lives aren't made up of simple stories. Think of all the people you know and love and how sometimes our connections with them get so hopelessly tangled that we can't remember what the problem was in the first place. Or think of the number of times we've been between a rock and a hard place knowing that whatever choice we make; we'll hurt someone.

Or think of the times we've been driven by circumstances to a place where we do something we know the rules and regulations tell us not to do so we can help someone in need. Does the phrase, "It's easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission" sound familiar? So Jesus tells us the story of the Dishonest Manager. Why? Because Jesus knows that our lives aren't black and white and we need guidance to live a better life. And so Jesus gives us the gift of forgiveness. Forgiveness that is given openly, freely and without restraint for there is nothing we can ever do that will take God's love away from us. There is no way we can be anything less than God's beloved sons and daughters, no matter how many times we make mistakes. We are

forgiven before we even know we're going to do something wrong. Forgiveness is ours for the asking every step of the way of our lives; how can we not want to take it for ourselves?

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." That's what happens in this parable. The dishonest manager is forgiven even as he forgives others. And this is the best part. It's not neat and tidy and clean cut. There are still loose ends because once again Jesus knows what our lives are like. We aren't God and we're not perfect. We're human and we're always going to have mixed motives and make mistakes; even when we're trying to do the right thing.

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves and in this parable he's telling us that it's OK. It's OK to have mixed motives and make mistakes; what's important is to keep trying. If we waited until we felt perfect love and forgiveness in our hearts; we'd never do anything. But in this parable Jesus is telling us to just go ahead and do it. Forgive everyone. Forgive them when we know they are wrong. Forgive them when we don't feel like it. Forgive them when we aren't talking to each other. Just forgive them.

And it doesn't matter how we feel afterwards. We might not feel anything. We might feel a rush of love and grace. Or we might still feel mad and cranky. What does matter is that we've taken the first step. Whatever else is in our hearts there is also a little seed of forgiveness that has taken root. And one day if we keep practicing we're going to find that forgiveness in our heart has grown so great that we can even start to forgive ourselves. There's a bit of the Dishonest Manager in all of us. We wheel and deal in front of God trying to manage our lives to look good before God. Jesus tells us in this parable that he sees right through us—and loves us dearly anyway.

Loving the real person and not the ideal is the challenge. Loving each other even when our foibles and mistakes are so readily apparent is the struggle we all face. And when we can't do this with the forgiveness and grace we would like to have; the Good News is that we are forgiven too!