

The Conniving Steward¹

This parable is probably the most perplexing that we have. Preachers avoid it because it's difficult to explain how it is not recommending dishonest behavior. And make no mistake. The steward's behavior was thoroughly dishonest and we should not imitate such wrong-doing. I think that the best way to explain some of Jesus' parables that showcase crooked or immoral people is to say that Jesus is trying to capture big new ideas like the Kingdom of God and the nature of God. He employs characters in his stories that "color outside the lines" so we can stretch our imaginations to take in his great vision. So, I repeat, this is not about dishonesty.

A second observation: This parable follows directly on the heels of the most famous parable of them all—the Parable of the Prodigal Son. They were monks in the middle Ages who organized the Bible into the chapter and verse divisions. And it just so happens that they inserted a chapter division in between these parables. But if you pull that out leaving a continuous narrative you really have 4 parables in a row—the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost (or prodigal) son, and today's parable the dishonest steward. All of them deal with similar themes, notably the extraordinary grace of the master and the

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restoration of one who had messed up. So as we work on this today, keep in mind that we're talking about the Christian vision for salvation and recovery and health. Let's see what we can learn.

This is complicated enough to require some explanation. A steward is an estate manager. Envisioned here is a large farming operation with tenants renting land and having other financial dealings with a wealthy estate owner. The steward is his accountant and manager.

As it sometimes goes, this steward is embezzling money from the master's operation. This was a day when written records were scarce. The steward probably kept the only books in the village. He was in that tempting position to fudge a little here and there, and enrich himself in the process. The master supposedly would never know the difference.

But the steward gets caught. The master calls him in and fires him for dishonesty. Importantly, the master says, go get all of your record books and turn them in to me.

Now the steward is clever—a little too clever maybe. But he quickly sees a fresh opportunity in his situation. There is a little window of time when he is supposed to be rounding up the ledger sheets to turn them in. And apparently no one knows

that the steward has been fired. These factors lead to a daring scheme.

The steward takes the books to renters, one by one. He tells them something that they love hearing. He says, "Well, I've got great news. I've been talking with the Master, and he agrees with me that we are charging you quite a bit more than is necessary. And we're prepared to grant you a significant reduction in what you owe. How's that sound? Well, of course, it sounds great. It sounds a little fishy. But this is not the time to argue with a reduction. The steward goes on. "Kindly, take the pen and write in the ledger here in your own hand the reduction that I dictate. The steward grants about a 50% reduction and leaves. Everyone is giddy with excitement.

The steward goes from house to house spreading joy and completely confusing the ledger. Imagination at this point fills in between the words. The villagers—all considerably better off financially—are starting to talk to each other. Maybe a kind of celebration is breaking out. Strains of "He's a jolly good fella!" can be heard. They're actually singing about the master. Maybe the steward too.

It's in this atmosphere that the steward reports to the master with the ledgers. "Here are your books sir." It begins to dawn on the Master just what's happened to him. The Master

and his steward are the toast of the town. The master can announce that there are no reductions and that the steward technically wasn't working for him when he wrote down their balances. Not a good way to preserve one's popularity. He could just go along with the whole scheme and let the reductions stand. If he fired the steward, he'd have 25 different couches to sleep on because of all his new found friends. The master could actually keep the steward, knowing that he had the most clever steward in the country. Doubtless, the master would have to keep a closer eye on him in the future.

The ball is in the master's court. Jesus doesn't tell us what he does. We do know this. The master acknowledged the steward's cleverness. I can hear him now. "I've got to hand it to you. You're some kind of survivor. You haven't made this easy for me."

So, what are you and I to take from this? Here's how I'd put it: Love trumps everything. In the Kingdom of God, relationships are the coin of the realm. We learn this from the accountant in the story. The Steward, the consummate book-keeper, lives in the world of income equaling expenditures, of everything adding up to the penny, of arithmetical precision. But in the crunch he's genius enough to realize that making friends, not balancing books, is the royal road to survival.

The priority of love is at the heart of the three parables that come before this one. In the Prodigal Son parable, it's the father's love that saves the prodigal. In the parable of the lost sheep, it's the irrational care of the shepherd, which trumps all common sense, which sends him off in the wilderness looking for the one little lamb. Love.

Remember the stage show, the Music Man—which we enjoyed here a couple of years ago. Briefly, it's the story of a shyster salesman who takes advantage of the naiveté of small town Midwesterners. (One wonders what would have happened if Harold Hill, the traveling salesman, went to a Southern town—but I digress.) The salesman's scheme is to sell a bunch of band instruments and uniforms to families who are mesmerized by dreams of their children becoming part of a glorious marching band. Once the money is in the salesman's hand he is going to skip town before any kind of band is organized.

Well, the scheme founders gloriously. First of all, Harold Hill the salesman, falls in love with the town librarian, Marion the one person who is in a position to expose the ruse. She falls in love with him. Even more surprisingly, the awful results of children trying to play musical instruments with no instruction, is completely overlooked by their adoring parents. What started as a sinister scheme ends as a wonderful chapter in

the community when people are excited and work together and are drawn closer. The whole play is a secular commentary on the biblical words, "love covers a multitude of sins."

There's a book in the Old Testament called the Song of Solomon. Now SOS is the sexy part of the Bible in a PG kind of way. The Song of Solomon is a love poem about yearning and sensuality. Now it's not just in there to spice up the Old Testament. The Song of Solomon was, in ancient Israel, appointed to be read on the most important day in the Jewish calendar—Passover. Passover is about the slaves' escape from Egypt. We recall how the Hebrew people killed and ate a lamb and smeared the lamb's blood on the door posts and how the angel of death knew from the blood not to disturb that household. Instead the angel went only to Egyptian houses. This in turn, caused the Pharaoh to go ahead and let the Hebrew slaves go free.

So, why read love poetry on so somber and even ghastly day as Passover? Because underneath all the death and the escape of slaves, the Passover is about a passionately loving God is drawing his beloved people to himself. SOS helps us never to forget that.

In Christian faith, the whole thing is about love. The whole church thing is about love. You and I as a congregation

are a love-formed, love-driven community. If we miss that, if we operate in a loveless way, we've strayed from our essence. Our mission in our community is love. The minute we're out there fixing people glorying in our own truth, and have not love, we are nothing. The minute our encounter with God becomes a transaction and not a love relationship, we're off the reservation.

The estate manager in the parable was dishonest to be sure. But he was clever and that was his genius. How was he clever? He knew that relationships, that warmth, that affection would save him and those around. And that was enough for Jesus to point him out to you and me and say, in essence, learn from him.