

Proper 20 C 2016 Luke 16 Dishonest Manager

The sad story of a large embezzlement at Lander University reached its climax a couple of weeks ago.

A woman who had served as an assistant comptroller pled guilty to stealing \$500,000 or perhaps more.

Neither she nor the university know exactly how much.

Most of the funny business happened in payroll, via overtime, through direct deposit. The woman received poor advice about how to handle the comments she was allowed to make at sentencing, stressing that she did not use the funds to live extravagantly, noting that she never moved to Gatewood and that her car was four years old.

Saying such things when you apologize immediately invites comparison and response. I bought and paid for my own car, I thought, and it is 12 years old!

Such is the power of dishonest wealth over us.

This tragic woman sounded so entitled even she apologized, even as she stood before a judge and received a sentence.

Such things happen all the time.

Churches, small businesses, large ones, are subjected to fraud like this.

We don't like what the dishonest manager in the parable did.

He took money from his employer as he reduced the debts of the peasants.

He injured his employer, for whom we might have respect as the job-creator in the story.

And his action might have been unjust to peasant debtors he did not help out.

We might imagine that there were other peasants he did not so favor.

Indeed, he was better to one of the two than to the other.

We know the world works more smoothly when the laws of property and contracts are respected.

And most of us are on the side of life in which the laws of property and contracts make sense.

Those are systems in which we have learned to operate and in which some of us thrive.

It is not a simple leap from that economic realm, in which debts must be paid, in which stealing is forbidden, to the divine economy.

To the realm of relationships between Creator and creatures.

But this parable can likely tell us more about how we see God than about how we should handle our financial debts and responsibilities.

For the Gospel story is signaled in the actions of this strange character.

As things had gone wrong in the parable, as debts had grown and distrust set in, so too the creation has ached with sin and broken relationships, between God and God's people and between people as well.

Like ballooning credit card bills or payments not met has been the distance between God's hope for the world and the reality we have created.

And we could find little to do about it.

If there had been something to embezzle to set things right, humanity would have done it long.

And indeed, the record of our lives and civilizations are often of reaching for the wrong solution to what ails us.

What we confess is that God chose to fudge the books, to release the debt, to free us from our peonage.

God gave the world Jesus, his love, his death, and his resurrection, to make us new.

No longer desperately burdened by the accrued debt of our years, like sharecroppers tied to the land.

But set free for new life and for holiness.

God, like this poor manager, refrained from judgment and entered into the situation of our sin with us in Christ.

Reduced, forgave our debts and moved in with us in Jesus.

It would be just and right that we would wear our debt for our injustice to each other, our destruction of the creation, our failure to love God.

But God has been willing to meet with us and clear the ledger, to declare us each and all a new creation in Christ, not just free from debt but given new grace, new gifts, and the Holy Spirit.

A gift I think we could all give each other is the reduction of our collective sense of entitlement, a general lowering of our anxious expectations for each other.

As God has forgiven you in advance in Jesus, it is good for you to forgive others in advance as well.

Met them with more grace and fewer demands,

With thicker skin and less criticism,

As God is satisfied with us in Christ, let us be inclined to be satisfied with each other, to reduce our sense of what others owe us.

And then the gifts we give each other increase in excellence, shining with the freedom in which they are given.

Don't you enjoy a paid-off car? They drive so nice.

For when debt is removed, we are made free.

Then love and its deeds are pure, and the Kingdom is at hand.