



September 23, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 16:1-13

“Creative Bookkeeping”

When we gather to worship on Sunday and hear Scripture read, we hope that God will bring us good news, to speak to our hearts and help us in the challenges of life. What did we hear today? The Gospel lesson, if you were listening carefully, may have been somewhat confusing. In this parable, Jesus seems to be praising dishonesty! Jesus tells of a manager who was wildly “cooking the books” of his employer, to save his own skin should he lose his job- as his boss clearly threatened. Where’s the good news here? We thought we could trust Jesus to show us the way to live! What are we to do with this teaching???

There may be some comfort in knowing that this parable has presented enormous difficulty to Bible scholars through all of Christian history. There are nearly as many different interpretations of this story as there have been articles about it.

Most interpretations fall into either of two categories. Either they struggle valiantly with the fact that Jesus seems to be praising dishonesty, or they conclude there was a catastrophic scribal error in verse 8 that results in a wrong conclusion.

There is a tiny difference between a Greek capital letter “lamda” and a capital “delta”. The word “aliskas” meaning “expertise” or “prudence” became by accident “adiakias” which means “un-righteousness”- which appears in a number of Bible translations. Our pew Bibles are in the New Revised Standard version. The translators appear to have tried to come up with something in-between! Verse 8 reads, “The master commended the dishonest manager because he acted SHREWDLY.” I guess a more accurate translation would be, “The master commended the steward because he acted with unrighteousness.” Whoa. You can

see why Bible scholars might think a scribe miscopied one letter, and that Jesus REALLY said, “The master commended the steward because he acted with prudence.”

Those who do not try to resolve this puzzled by suggesting a sleepy scribe made an error have come up with various explanations of what Jesus was getting at.

One of them was very interesting. This theory suggests the manager, who WAS dishonest was likely dishonest all along. He was probably overcharging his master’s accounts for years—and after giving the master what he was owed, he pocketed the rest for himself. When he knew he was in trouble with his master, he stopped doing that—and just asked for what his master was owed. This made the people think they were getting a tremendous break and would be favorably disposed toward him. Critics of this theory say the difference between what was actually owed and what the manager was charging was staggering. And in the end this theory doesn’t help us much- Jesus still seems to be praising dishonesty.

Some interpreters say the term “shrewd” is the best indicator of what Jesus was teaching. He wasn’t praising the manager’s dishonesty, but saying that the people of light must be as shrewd and canny as the people of the world. To serve God’s purposes of love and redemption, we must apply ourselves as vigorously and shrewdly as the dishonest manager did in his predicament. This is not to say we should use DISHONEST METHODS, the theory concludes.

Jesus was likely teaching something like that. Spreading the news of God’s love and redemption is worthy of our best insights, energy and effort. The dishonest manager’s best efforts and insights were DISHONEST because HE was. Our best efforts and insights will NOT be DISHONEST because we serve the One who is the Truth, the Way and Life. There is a vital message for us in this.

However, I found one more interpretation worthy of serious consideration. To understand this one let’s remember that Jesus told this parable in a particular situation and time.

Jesus had been attending banquets of his community’s wealthy and powerful people. He’d also been eating and drinking with sinners. The community and religious leaders were furious with his breaches of convention and his breaking of Jewish laws. Every time he said “Go, your sins are forgiven,” to a person in need of forgiveness and cleansing, the Pharisees’ and religious leaders’ blood boiled. “No one can forgive sins,” they raged. “This is blasphemy!”

For the leaders of his faith and community, JESUS HIMSELF WAS AN UNJUST STEWARD. Every time he said, “Your sins are forgiven,” he was “cooking the books” of divine judgment in their eyes. From their perspective, JESUS was engaged in “unrighteous” acts. For him to say the dishonest steward received the master’s commendation was Jesus’ way of saying, “God is full of pride and praises me for what I do.”

The Hebrew vision of the Last Judgment and Christ’s message about our ultimate fate were not the same. The Hebrew vision suggests that after our death our fate will be decided in a courtroom type of setting. Arguments will be made, both for and against us. The good we have done in our lives will be brought out, evaluated as to quality, and weighed as to quantity. The evil we have done will get the same treatment. Justice will be done in consigning us to salvation or perdition based on the way the scales balance or tip.

Christ’s teachings do not uphold this vision. Christians often appear to be confused about this! We may anxiously pile up good deeds for that final weigh-in! Or we may look back on our lives to see so much wrong, failure and evil that we figure we might as well GIVE UP on trying to live right, thinking it’s too late to tip the balance on the scales.

But friends, Jesus says all we need to do is take the hand he holds out to us, and we are redeemed. We are free of sin, washed clean, drawn back to God’s heart, and restored to a relationship of love with our brothers and sisters in the human family.

Jesus, viewed from the Pharisees’ perspective, was doing “creative bookkeeping”. He was “cooking the books” and we are the beneficiaries. THIS IS GOOD NEWS FOR US TODAY! As people who have received the gift of creative bookkeeping God has accomplished through Christ, we will now live differently. We will live with gratitude, recycling and passing on the forgiveness, love and grace we have received.

A pastor heard of a woman in his parish who claimed that God spoke to her directly in prayer. To test her abilities, he suggested she ask Jesus what sin he committed in his life that sent him to his knees as a young man, bringing him to Christ and into the ministry. She agreed to do this. At their next meeting, the minister asked her if she had received a message from Christ on this matter. She smiled and said indeed she had. “What did he say,” the pastor asked, “when you asked him what sin I committed?” Leaning forward the woman took her pastor’s hand. “This is what he said,” she murmured, “I don’t remember. Jesus said, ‘I don’t remember that sin.’”

Ours is a God who promises: “I will remember your sins no more”. Isaiah 43:25 states, “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions... and remembers your sins no more.” Through Christ there is forgiveness and creative bookkeeping. Ours is a God of forgiveness, a God of second chances, a God of new beginnings, a God of new life. **THAT IS GOOD NEWS!!** Good news to take through our week, good news to share with others, good news to transform us into Christ’s people—good news to make true the saying, “They shall know we are Christians by our love.” So be it. Amen.