
THE UNPREACHABLE GOSPEL

Preaching is not as easy as it looks.

- Over the years, I have had many helpful parishioners suggest things I might do to “improve” my sermons:
 - “Do more Bible study.”
 - “Do more sermon series.”
 - “I like when you challenge us.”
 - “You challenge us too much. We need to be comforted.”
 - “Tell us things we can do to be better Christians.”
 - “Don’t tell us what to do. Tell us that everything we’re doing now is fine.”
 - “Just make sure the sermon is about JESUS.”
- Well, meeting all these expectations is no problem...and then in the gospel we hear JESUS say, *“I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourself, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”*
 - Some translations call it “dishonest wealth.”
 - Thanks a lot, JESUS! No way am I preaching on that!

This parable called “The Shrewd or Dishonest Manager” is often called the bad egg of parables because we don’t understand what JESUS means by it.

- I just call it, “the unpreachable gospel.”
- We don’t understand it, and I’m not preaching on it!

I mean, here you’ve got a manager who has been squandering his boss’ wealth and is going to be fired for it.

- That makes sense.

So, the manager starts making deals with his boss’ debtors to get them on his side.

- That also makes sense, though not as a model for what we as Christians should be doing.

But then his boss praises the manager for being clever.

- And then JESUS says, *“Use worldly, dishonest wealth to make friends for yourselves.”*
 - I am not preaching on this gospel!

The ELCA website asked pastors this week how they were going to make sense of this text.

- One pastor said, “Maybe JESUS was practicing a bit of sarcasm.”
 - “Give HIS words that type of tone and it changes the message.”
 - (Sarcastically) *“Use worldly wealth to make friends.”*
 - I don’t know if that helps.
- Another said, “Irony, if not sarcasm. See the last line for what HE’S really saying, I think.”
 - *“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both GOD and money.”*
 - One master is the rich man and the other is wealth?
 - I don’t know. That doesn’t really do it for me.

Other pastors suggested rationalization by the manager.

- “Maybe because he recognizes his dishonesty and instead of excusing it, he made the best of a bad situation.”
- “Maybe the rich man was overcharging and the manager was just trying to put things right for people.”
- “Maybe the manager is trying to do right, but doesn’t know that what he’s doing is wrong.”

Another said, “We don’t understand all the ways of GOD. Maybe we’re not supposed to understand this parable.”

One pastor said, “You assume that we are preaching on the gospel. I’m preaching on a different lesson.

- I kind of like that strategy.
 - That would be a good way to avoid the unpreachable gospel.
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The real problem with preaching on this text is the interpretation.

- How do we interpret what JESUS meant?
- You’d have to start with the three questions I suggest we ask with parables.

1) Who is GOD in the story?

- Well, it’s probably the rich man. It is GOD who is the true owner of everything, the source of all wealth.

2) Who are we in the parable?

- The manager? Maybe. We have been put in charge of a portion of GOD’S wealth.
- But shrewd? Dishonest? That’s not a good description for us.
- I can’t preach on that.

3) What is GOD saying to us or to the Church?

- Um...I don’t know. So, I just can’t preach on this text.
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It would probably make more sense if we could see ourselves as stewards.

- We often talk about stewardship as what we do with all over which GOD has placed us.
- But it becomes different with this parable when we consider ourselves stewards over the MASTER’S wealth.
- How might that play out?

Some preachers might look at the identified “dishonest wealth.”

- In his gospel, Luke feels that all wealth is dirty.
- Consider the dollar bill in your wallet or purse.
- Where has it been?
- What has it purchased?
- How has it been used?
 - Dishonestly? Who has it cheated?
- If that’s what is meant by worldly or dishonest wealth, then you can use it build bridges that will bring people into the Kingdom of GOD.
- That would be the kind of action that might lead to your being welcomed into the eternal dwelling.

Or some preachers might talk about being faithful with what is small.

- v. 11 says, *“So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?”*
- Have you ever told someone a small but privileged thing about yourself and then had them reveal it in a way that hurt you?
- Would you trust that person again, even with something small, must less something of real value?
- It’s an issue of character.
- If you want to be trusted in big things, you’ve got to show that you are reliable in small things.
- If you want GOD to trust you with greater responsibility in the Kingdom, you have to show that you are trustworthy in even the smallest things.

You know, there are some folks who really aren’t even comfortable hearing anything about this parable.

Many would just prefer not to talk about money at all in the church.

- We know that wealth is both a blessing and a responsibility.
- We know that we are blessed so that we can be blessings to others.
- And perhaps the shrewdness of the manager comes in his recognition of the value of using wealth to develop relationships that matter.

A lot of folks don’t want to be reminded that wealth, along with status and power and privilege is fleeting.

- One day this manager was on top of the world, and the next he was faced with disaster.

I remember hearing how, toward the end of the Civil War, as the prospect of a Confederate victory declined, so did the value of Confederate currency.

- Those bills and coins became increasingly worthless, so many began to spend them freely in the hopes of purchasing something—anything—that might be of more lasting value.

When we consider the limits of this world and its wealth and values, we might find it also to be declining.

- Perhaps the message of this parable is to use our wealth in ways that help those in need or who have been abused by the system.

Perhaps the key to this passage is that we are placed on this earth to love and care for each other,

- and not to separate ourselves from each other with wealth, status, or privilege.
- St. Augustine supposedly said that GOD gave us people to love and things to use,
 - and original sin finds itself in our tendency to confuse those two,
 - loving things and using people.

This is the unpreachable gospel, and I just don’t want to preach on it.

- But maybe I could find something to say that might be thought-provoking or have some value or meaning for us.
- Maybe there is a message in here somewhere for us to consider.
 - Unfortunately, we are out of time.