

SERMON

The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

September 22, 2019

Luke 16:1-13

Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.'

“Give me an accounting,” bellowed the rich land owner who brought charges against the man hired to be his manager—who was squandering his property. “Give me an accounting!” Where is the Gospel of Luke going with this passage? No one I know likes this parable! “Give me an accounting!” That’s enough to stop us all in our tracks! Is Luke’s Jesus telling a parable intended to accuse us all of mismanaging? Of squandering? Of being wasteful? Irresponsible? Of being dishonest? Of being unfaithful? Underserving? Are we all bound for dismissal? Parables are intended to get our attention. They are stories within the story. The people in the story-within-the-story aren’t real people. They are characters in the parable intended to shock us—wake us up. This one does! And, why does Jesus commend the dishonest steward? A parable tilts things in such a way that we’re not so sure we know what to think anymore. Or *what to do*.

What we see in this story is—what happens when the guilty one gets caught with his hand in the cookie jar. The first thing the accused does, is say, “What am I to do?!” What am I to do? When confronted with a problem, a real problem, “What do I believe?” is not the first thing on my mind. But like this fellow, I’m thinking, “What am I to do?!” In real-time, crisis-time, survival time “What am I to do?” is the critical question. I’ve always been a pragmatic-sort-of-person—dealing with things realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations. I was held up with a handgun once on a rainy Monday night in Baltimore. My life didn’t flash before my eyes. And I didn’t think theologically at that moment. Rather, “What am I to do?” was the only thing going on in my head. What to say? How to manipulate the situation. Lessons learned from others went through my mind. “Anger provokes anger,” I remembered a friend telling me who was shot because he reacted to a similar situation with anger. A pragmatist is someone who is practical and focused on reaching a goal. A pragmatist is pretty straightforward, thinks out an approach and doesn't let distractions or emotions get in the way. A pragmatic person isn’t so much concerned with what should be, but how things are and what to do about it.

Early in my seminary studies, it was the Social Gospel Movement that interested me the most. Walter Rauschenbusch was a key figure. He wrote,

"The Spirit of God is moving people
toward a better understanding of the idea
of the Kingdom of God on earth,
...as a practical realization in the world."

The Social Gospel Movement focused on work—building the Kingdom of God on earth. The Social Gospel Movement was and is pragmatic. It is honest about the failings of society, (hands caught in the cookie jar), and asks the question, "What are we to do?" And then, makes a plan. Rauschenbusch's work influenced Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu, Lucy Randolph Mason, (labor activist and suffragette), Reinhold Niebuhr, ...Harvey Cox. Even in the 21st century Rauschenbusch's name is used by certain social-justice ministries such as the Rauschenbusch Metro Ministries in New York and the Rauschenbusch Center for Spirit and Action in Seattle.

I happen to like the dishonest man in the Gospel today! Because he owns up to his failings—not things as they should be but things as they are, and makes a plan. He owns-up and makes a plan.

"I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.
I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed
as manager, people may welcome me into their homes."

The pragmatist says,

"You know what happens if you make a plan and it doesn't work?
You make another plan!"

The rebuttal (from Woody Allen, no less) is:

"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

I guess, it's just the human condition—our failings and our desire to make the most of it. Yet, in my book, "What are we to do?" marries faith with practice. It is a test of our faith and courage. In Archbishop Desmond Tutu's Book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, the story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, I first read these words, and grappled with these thoughts:

"Just because something is legal does not make it right.
And because something is right does not mean that it is legal."

We all fall short of the Kingdom of God. The response, "What are we to do?" marries faith with practice. It is a test of our faith and courage.

This week we saw thousands of young people protest for action to fight climate change. I walked with a group of young people in Annapolis on Friday. I wanted to watch and listen to what they had to say. Perhaps more than the rest of us, young people around the world are willing to see the crisis—the rise of planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions. In New York City alone, organizers estimate that there were 250,000 people. Greta Thunberg, the 16-year old Swedish activist who has inspired world-wide student strikes, spoke. She has repeated again and again, in pragmatic terms, "Don't listen to me, listen to the scientists." The Governor of New York issued a statement:

"Our young people understand climate change is no longer up for debate
—it's reality based in science."

I walked down Main Street with about 100 marchers, an observer, really, listening to their chants, and their pleas for a future. "You had your future, we want ours." And on the palms of their hands was written:

"Our Future. Your hands."

Let's be honest about our failings, our failure as human beings to manage God's creation—Prodigal, as in the parable of the Prodigal Son—means "wasteful." It means not providing for the

future. It means misusing assets in our control. It means not managing the land, the crops, the resources, the food, the enterprise, with care. It means poor administration. Irresponsibility. Squandering. Not remembering who is this real benefactor and creator. Dishonest stewards. All of us. Not holding each other accountable. Looking the other way. The young people want us to ask the question, “What are we to do?” and then, make a plan. By the way, Luke loves this question. He uses it more than once in parables and in the Book of Acts.

“What are we to do?” As we walked, I thought about what we might do. Epiphany Church. Right here. The center part of this building is heated with oil. the two wings with electricity. The Conboy Center heats water that runs though the floors—but that water is heated with oil. The Conboy Center has a huge roof with southern exposure. What if, we could get rid of those oil tanks. Fossil fuels. Plastics. *Listen to the scientists*. The dishonest manager didn’t point to others or wait for them. He focused on his own responsibilities and made a plan.

Together, in this place, we “practice” our faith so that we can learn to live it everyday. We gain encouragement and support from each other. We “practice” in order to live more courageously and faithfully. The Psalmist says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” Remember, none of this is ours. Everything we have is a gift from God and belongs to God. “Give me an accounting,” bellows the true owner of the land. Let’s take a look at Luke’s parable again. (Michael Marsh) What if the accounting asked of us is never complete, the books are never closed and the bottom line is never tallied, until... there is new life. That’s what God is looking for. What if the accounting is not about finding wrongdoing but a new way of living? What if a crisis is about grace rather than punishment? This certainly changes our understanding. Isn’t this what parables are supposed to do? Parables change the way we see and understand. The accounting of our management isn’t about numbers, wrongdoing, or punishment but about helping us see and orient or reorient our lives in a new direction. Parable open new possibilities for us—help us to marry our faith with practice—to test our faith and courage. Let’s ask the right question, "What are we to do?" And together, make the best plans.

Amen.