

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona

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Did you pay attention to that Gospel reading? My reaction to it is always - Huh??? This Gospel of the Dishonest Manager seems to be describing a different god, a different kingdom than the one we usually hear about.

Let's take a look at the story: A rich man heard that his manager had been cheating him. Many times in Jesus' day rich landowners would not live on their property and would, instead, hire a manager to take care of the land in their absence. Someone told the rich man that his manager was cheating him. So the rich man fired his manager and told him he wanted a full accounting of his management. The manager, as you can well imagine, was really upset for he needed some kind of income and he knew that he was not strong enough to work on a construction site and he certainly did not want to hold up a sign at a major intersection in town, you know, one of those signs saying that he was homeless and needed money. Jesus tells us that this man was shrewd and so he thought of and executed a plan where he would have the kind of protection that he needed once he stopped working. He might have even thought, oh well, what do I have to lose, I have already been fired. So he contacted all of the people who owed something to the rich man and he cut a deal with each of them. He did so believing that these people would be in his debt and that they would take care of him when he was in need. He told them to take their bills and reduce the amount that was owed, changing 100 jugs of olive oil to 50; changing 100 containers of wheat to 80. I would expect that those debtors were pretty happy about this. And amazingly, and here is the twist in the story, here is the part that always makes me go "huh?". Not only were the debtors happy, so too was the rich man; he praised the dishonest manager because he had acted so shrewdly. Really? The dishonest manager

reduced the amount of money that the rich man would receive and the rich man praised him?

Now, some commentaries try to make this look a little better by saying that all that the dishonest manager was doing was eliminating his own profit and not hurting the profits of the rich man at all. Well, maybe but we don't really know that. What we do know, and this is the troublesome part, Jesus tells us that the rich man praised the swift and creative actions of the manager. Was Jesus saying that acting dishonestly is ok?

I hope that this Gospel makes each of us think about shrewd, maybe even dishonest dealings that we have heard of or maybe even some that we may have participated in. I read one online – can't remember who to credit with this story – but want to repeat it for it really is ingenious.

“Two partners had a clothing store. One partner would stay in the back room while the other waited on the people. The one waiting on the people would pretend that he was hard of hearing. When a customer chose a suit and wanted to know how much it cost, the clerk would call to his partner in the back room, ‘How much is this suit, Harry?’ Harry would reply loud and clear so the customer would be sure to hear, ‘\$149.’ The hard of hearing clerk would then say, ‘He said it is \$129.’ Many people would hurry and buy the suit for \$129, thinking they were making a good deal because the person waiting on them did not hear the correct price. Little did the customer realize that his greed cost him several dollars. The same suit sold for \$119 or less in other stores.”

What a story – these two men surely were shrewd, creative, intentional and dishonest in their efforts to make money.

I heard a sermon on this Gospel once where the priest actually said that although the funds that his church had used to build a community center, that even though these funds were given to the church by some unsavory characters, maybe someone like Tony Soprano, or maybe even a Walter White of Breaking Bad kind of character, he said that since the building was

used to house a clothing ministry, a food kitchen and a shelter, he said that God had to be pleased and didn't really care where the money had come from.

The Parable of the Dishonest Manager – is this included in scripture because Jesus supports our dishonest actions if they result in overall good? Certainly, the debtors were cared for in this parable. The rich man received his money. The Community Center served the community and those people who bought the suits spent less than they had planned and were excited about the deal they received. Is God pleased with this?

The problem for me is that I don't believe that God or Jesus is calling us to use dishonest means to bring in the kingdom. I don't believe that we are being called to use dishonesty in our work to feed the poor. What helps me with this parable of the dishonest manager is to believe instead that what Jesus was telling his disciples, what Jesus is telling us is to use the same intensity and creativity and focus that we use in our lives, that this dishonest manager had used, not the same dishonesty, but the same shrewdness in our work for all that is good, the same creativity perhaps in finding time to pray; the same shrewdness (which, by the way, is defined in Webster's dictionary as clever, sharp in practical affairs, or astute), to be shrewd in all that we do as Christians; in all that we do as managers of God's kingdom; to be more than Sunday only Christians, to use the intensity and focus and cleverness that we use on all of the other parts of our lives, to use this in how we live as Christians. For Jesus tells us that we can't serve two masters. He tells us that if we use our creativity, shrewdness, intensity only in our secular, non-Christian, worldly affairs, then we are like the manager and we are cheating God, then we are not living the life of the disciple that Jesus calls us to live.

We are called to be creative and shrewd and to do all that we can every minute of our lives to spread the good news of the Gospel, to celebrate God's kingdom, to share the great wealth that we have received so that all of God's creation can live in this beauty and splendor.

We are called to be creative and shrewd when as a church we enter into the Stewardship Campaign. We are certainly creative and shrewd with our fundraising shindigs. Let's be creative and shrewd when we work to increase our membership, to increase our pledge base so that together we can do more to bring about God's justice in the world.

We are all stewards, we are all managers of God's creation. Let us each live every day of our lives celebrating that and being as shrewd and as focused and as honest as we can be.