

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
18 September 2022

Luke 16:1-13

Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012), the Mexican novelist and playwright whom some called "the soul of Mexico," gave a long interview about his writing shortly after he turned 50 and began to contemplate his mortality. "I used to write to live," he said. "Now I write not to die. I'll live as long as I have another story to tell." Today we encounter the greatest storyteller in the world, telling us one of the most difficult stories he could have told. In fact, the story of the dishonest manager is so difficult that most preachers never dare preach on it. In many ways, the story of the dishonest steward should belong in chapter 15 of Luke, right after the Prodigal Son. The two stories were only separated in the 4th century when monks divided the Gospel of Luke into chapter and verses. The two stories are meant to be read together. According to Kenneth Baley, both stories share (a) A noble master who shows extraordinary grace to a wayward underling. This amazing grace is seen in the fact that when the master discovers the mismanagement of his wealth and the theft that probably had gone on for years, he did not choose to sell the servant and his family into slavery to recover his lost wealth or put him in prison for life. Instead, he just chose to fire him quietly. (b) Both stories share a wayward son or manager who wastes the master's resources. (c) Both stories show how the wayward son or manager reaches a moment of truth, when they asked themselves, "Now what?" (d) Both the wayward son and the dishonest manager have absolute confidence in the mercy and generosity of the noble master. Finally, (e) Both stories explore the problems that result from broken trust and the theme of forgiveness.

Now, let me recap the story very briefly. A wealthy landowner who was in the business of renting the land to sharecroppers and farmers, learns from reliable sources in the community that his manager has mismanaged his wealth and stolen from him for years. We know that the community sources are reliable because the master does not investigate, as he would have done if the reports came from unreliable sources. Trusting the information, he calls the manager and fires him in private, demanding that the account books be returned immediately. The manager remains silent during the encounter, refusing to take one of three options: (a) begging for his job on the basis of past performance and loyalty, or by appealing to the years of service given by his family to the master. (b) demanding to confront the accusers one by one in an attempt to somehow catch them in inconsistencies and in hopes of saving his job. (c) calling on powerful friends to speak to the master on his behalf, as it was customary in the culture. Patronage was important, and if you had powerful friends, their intervention could make all the difference. The manager, however, remains silent. This is common to Jesus' stories. The implication is that the manager is a sinner who by his silence has acknowledged his guilt. We are then told that as the manager went to get his books, he had a time to think about his situation. He acknowledges that he is not able to work the fields, plowing, digging,

harvesting, etc. Perhaps he is past his prime and unable to do the demanding work. He also knows that he doesn't have the qualifications to beg. He is not blind, crippled, or ill. His situation is precarious. But he also remembers the master's great generosity in not imprisoning him or selling his family into slavery. So, he decides to play one last card up his sleeve in a very creative way. The expression "sin fathers sin, which in turn procreates more sin" is applicable here. The manager does something illegal to try to get himself out of the hole he is in. He devises a plan to be "received by others" when the village learns that he has been fired. The expression "to be received" means to find a job. He wants to manager another master's affairs. In order for the plot to work, he must act quickly before anyone finds out that he has been fired.

He calls the master's debtors and has private interviews with them. We know that this is not harvest time because of the large sums owed to the Master. A tenant would slowly accumulate debt throughout the season and at harvest time he would pay the master the total sum, when he sold the harvest. He reduces the debt of the first by 50%, the second by 20%, and most likely many others by equal percentages. These were huge reductions on the debt. In the first case, for example, 50 measures of oil would be worth 500 denarii, which was a man's wages for almost two years. The action of reducing the debts before anyone finds out he has been fired is very smart. This type of back-room deal always had a public story and a private story. The public story is that every tenant would have great reasons to celebrate the master's generosity and the manager's compassion for the tenants. This would be the public story. The entire village would begin to praise the master's generosity in all the market stalls, in the temple, at the gates of the city, and at every place where men congregate. The children would make songs praising the great love of the master for his people. His reputation would extend wide and far. In fact, this public story would be such that the generous Master would never claim that the pardons were done illegally by one who was already terminated. The manager knows that the Master would be so pleased by how far and wide his reputation had extended that he would allow the pardons to remain, thus becoming the hero of the village. The manager is counting on the generosity the master has shown him already to continue well into the future. This type of reputation would be worth more to the master than the debt that was forgiven.

The back room deals also had a private story. By agreeing to the pardons and writing the new amounts in the ledger in their own handwriting, the debtors are now accomplices of the manager's illegal behaviors. Being accomplices buys their secrecy and loyalty to the manager. They would not dare come to the master and make any allegations against the manager for any past illegal behaviors without angering the master who could demand the land back, forcing them to leave their only source of livelihood. Additionally, it was understood at the time of the deal that the manager had the right to claim up to half of the forgiven debt. By having these meetings in secret with each debtor, without witnesses, the manager holds all the power. He garners the debtors loyalty, he garners the good-will of the community who sees him as a hero, and he binds

the master to allow the pardons for fear that his reputation would take a fateful blow, after he has become so beloved by everyone in the village.

As a local hero, with some money in his pocket, quiet and loyal accomplices, and a generous master who chooses to forgive the debt, the shrewd manager is in fact okay at the end of the story. In fact, Jesus commends the manager for his behaviors. But Jesus does not mean to imply that we should steal, cheat, lie, and manipulate to get what we want. In fact, what Jesus says could be read the following way, “This is a fraud; but it is an ingenious fraud. This steward is a rascal; but he is a wonderfully clever rascal” (Kenneth Baily, “Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes). Jesus knows that the entire ploy rests on one belief: the belief that the master is incredibly generous and will choose to forgive the debts to safeguard his honor. This is what Jesus commends in the manager. He calls him a “son of this age,” which is an implicit judgement of his behaviors. But, Jesus does commend his absolute trust in the master’s goodness. In a way Jesus is saying the following, “If even the sons of this world, if even sinful and unrighteous people can have an absolute trust in the goodness and generosity of God, then how much more you who are the children of light, should have absolute trust in the goodness and mercy of God!” This parable then, like the parable of the Prodigal Son, is not so much about the manager as it is about the master’s great generosity and compassion. What Jesus is saying is that his followers need to trust God’s compassion with their entire being. As children of the light they are expected to live righteous and ethical lives very different from the manager’s life, but at the end of the day, they must have as much certainty as the manager had that the master is merciful, compassionate, loving, and kind.

Sadly, this man had been so busy serving his own needs and chasing after wealth that at some point he stopped serving his benevolent and compassionate master. Jesus says, we can’t serve two masters at the same time. This parable then is about two realities. On the one hand, this parable is about God forgiving our debts. We must be absolutely certain of this! There can be no doubt. On the other hand, it is also about serving God rather than money. It is about how we chose to spend our wealth. In a way the invitation is to serve God and to rely completely on his generosity and not to obsess about wealth, like this manager, who became unethical in the pursuit of wealth. God, through the sacrifice of his son has forgiven our debts, not just halfway, but the whole way. And he provides for us what we need. For this we must always serve him and we must trust in his provision. May he who has forgiven our debts continue to bless you today and always. Amen!