

Pentecost 15C 18 September 2022
Luke 16:1-13
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management.
Let's pray:

Most commentaries about today's gospel quickly make the point that it's a strange and difficult text; and it is. It depends on who is consigned to each role and offers different theological perspectives accordingly. Hence, the difficulty with even attributing a title for the parable. It's variously called the parable of the: "unjust steward", "unrighteous steward", "shrewd steward", "dishonest manager", and "shrewd manager", just to name a few. I remember arguing with my preaching lecturer at Sem about the direction I wanted to take a sermon on this text, and we couldn't agree, even though I used Arthur Just, one of the world's finest Lukan scholars to defend my position.

The parable simply doesn't make sense. Who's not baffled by a dishonest employee being commended by his boss? That's not how we want the world to be. That's not what we teach our children. It's certainly not what we expect Jesus to say or encourage. So, I'll focus today on something that, while not necessarily easier, is a bit more understandable and familiar. Still, there'll be plenty of "maybes" and questions.

"Give me an account of your management," the master said to his manager. We've all heard similar words when we've been called to make an account of ourselves. Some examples:

- The ATO invites you to bring your documents and account for the numbers on your tax return.
- You're called to the principal's office?
- You sit down with a doctor, counsellor, or friend and he or she says, "Where does it hurt? How are you going? How can I help you?"
- The boss says, "I want to see you in my office, pronto!"

- You come home and your spouse utters those four unsettling words, “We need to talk.”
- Each Sunday we come to the place in the liturgy when the pastor says, “Let us confess our sins.”

In all of those situations, an accounting of our management is being demanded. It's not easy. Giving an account of ourselves can be uncomfortable; even nerve-racking. We review our words and actions wondering, “What have I done? What haven't I done? What will I do? Where will all this lead to?”

No one likes to have to give an accounting. We're pretty private about our books. Not only do we not want others to see the balance, sometimes we don't want to see the balance. We don't want to face and deal with that reality. But that's what this accounting asks of us.

You see, the accounting demanded of this manager, just like the ones demanded of us, is really an accounting of his life. It asks us to audit the books of our life to see what we're doing with it, and highlights who we're serving. It raises important questions. What are we doing with the resources, assets, and gifts entrusted to us? Our time, money, ideas, dreams, hopes. Passions and concerns. People and relationships. Love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy. Talents and abilities. Questions and curiosities. What if we were to give an accounting of our management of these? What would our books look like? What do they reveal about us? Where, how, in what ways, and on whom, are we spending and investing these assets?

These aren't just questions to be answered individually. There's also a communal aspect to them. What do the books and balances say about our national life? How is our international reputation holding up? What do the world's books say about our humanity?

At every level people are trying to serve two masters. And it just doesn't work. Think about everything that's happened over the last couple of years and the toll that events have taken on human life and thinking. Are we happy with the way things are? Can we do things differently to bring about better change? Do our decisions and actions reflect the masters we serve?

Today's gospel calls us to account for our management of all that we are and all that we have. The demand for an accounting often sounds like someone is in trouble. That's how today's parable begins. The manager has been charged with squandering his master's property. He's going to be fired. He'll lose his job, income, reputation, and status. A part of him is dying. At some level he will lose his life as he currently knows it.

Whether we've lived it, heard it from a friend, or read it in the news, it's a familiar story. Somebody has been bad. They've been caught. Now they're going to get their come-uppance. That's how the world thinks. That's what we expect. Justice, or worse, revenge! But here's the rub. That's not how the kingdom of God works. 'God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—' (Ephesians 2:4,5).

Parables are meant to make us think and challenge our preconceptions of God and his kingdom. So, we should be wary of coming to a definitive interpretation of this parable. We have no basis for confidently declaring who each character represents: God, Jesus, or us. The parable doesn't offer a neat resolution; rather, it offers ambiguity and tension which feels to me a lot like real life. How about you?

Maybe this story in general and the manager in particular is simply a picture of that ambiguity and tension. It's a picture that probably looks like the tension and ambiguity in our own life struggles and decisions. There's even ambiguity in labelling this man as the "dishonest manager."

Maybe "dishonest" isn't the best translation of the word to describe what Jesus wants for us to learn from this parable. In the first place, we don't have any details of what this man did or didn't do to be charged with squandering and to be fired, or whether the charges are even valid. Second, while the word that's translated as "dishonest" can refer to a particular action or wrongdoing it can also mean the quality of unrighteousness in the sense of a violation of God's standards which attracts divine disapproval. Considered that way, the manager's relationship with his master isn't right. It's broken, impaired, out of sync. Perhaps the manager has chosen self-interest, self-loyalty, and self-serving over interest in, loyalty to, and service of his master. This manager then gives rise to Jesus' words, "No slave can serve two masters" [v13a].

Since we don't know much about this bloke or what he did, maybe we ought to shift our focus a bit. Instead of trying to audit his books maybe we ought to examine our own books. Instead of being shocked that this "dishonest manager" is commended, maybe we can see hope and possibilities for our own commendation. The accounting that should have been the manager's ruin became the starting point for a new life, new relationships, and a new home. Grace was hiding in the demand for an accounting, waiting to be discovered and claimed. The accounting demanded of this manager was both an ending and a new beginning, a death and a resurrection.

While the master may have wanted an audit of past numbers and transactions, the manager saw that his old life was empty, bankrupt. He could only attain new life by looking forward. New life would be found only in doing things differently – shrewdly, prudently, wisely. The manager claimed for himself the grace hidden in his master's demand for an accounting, and he was commended. If the "dishonest manager" can be commended, why not me? Why not you?

Here's a crazy idea. What if the accounting asked of us isn't complete, the books not closed, and the bottom line not tallied and signed off, until there's new life, until there's a commendation? What if the accounting isn't about finding wrongdoing but repentance, forgiveness, and new life? What if it's about grace rather than punishment? That certainly changes our usual understanding of an accounting but isn't that what parables are supposed to do? Challenge our thinking and change our perspective to God's kingdom perspective. If a parable makes sense, we've probably missed the point. Who can make sense of the crucifixion of a perfectly innocent, sinless, and beautiful man?

The accounting of our management isn't about numbers, wrongdoing, or punishment but about helping us to reorient our lives in a new and everlasting, life-affirming direction. It digs us out of our rut and opens our eyes to new possibilities. It dares us to accept not only the possibility but also the reality of our gracious and forgiving God and our eternal home. Saints, I want you to dare to believe, to live, because Jesus has already given his account, paid your account, and declared you forgiven and for heaven, for his name's sake. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.