

“I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” Wow—did Jesus really say that? Huh.

It’s an odd reading. Jesus seems to be commending dishonesty. From the way the Gospel is read in church, it could seem that Jesus is merely talking to the Disciples. Having a chat. Telling them that it was OK to be dishonest and that it’s actually “shrewd.”

Now—part of the problem is our lectionary. Our lectionary gives us readings in nice, manageable bite-sized pieces—and usually we’re all grateful for that. But to understand today’s reading, we need to go all the way back to the beginning of the conversation Jesus is having with the Pharisees and the disciples --otherwise it doesn’t really make sense.

Where does this conversation start? This is one of those rare times when I wish I could say, “Let’s just all take out our bibles and look at this passage.” But this is the Episcopal Church.

But if you have a bible—go ahead and take it out and follow along. Instead of starting at the beginning of Luke 16—like our gospel does today—let’s go back to start of the conversation: the beginning of Luke 15.

This section of Luke begins—if you’ll remember from a couple of weeks ago-- with the Pharisees taking Jesus to task for eating and drinking with less than respectable people. Jesus responds to the Pharisees with three stories— first, the story about the lost sheep & lost coin, then the story of the prodigal son: two stories that show why he eats with sinners instead of the upstanding

Jews—because God’s way of judging who is important is not always our way of judging who’s important—and the person who is least and a sinner in the eyes of the world (and the Pharisees) is infinitely important to God.

Jesus’ first two stories are addressed directly to the Pharisees to make the point that God’s love *isn’t limited* to the good people who like to hang out with other good people, all the while looking down with judgement and pity on the less fortunate sinners. Jesus’ first two stories tell them that God doesn’t see things the way human beings often do.

The third story Jesus tells them—that we just heard—is still told in the presence of the Pharisees, but he now turns to the disciples and tells another sort of story. It’s about a steward who has been acting most dishonestly—in fact charges have been brought against him. He knows he will be fired. He doesn’t want to do manual labor—digging, and he’s too proud to beg. So he figures out a scheme: *“I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.”* This dishonest steward tries to convince the people that he is “helping them” by reducing their debt. He’s cheating his manager—having them falsify their accounts, but here’s the thing— he’s really hoping the people will remember his generosity when he’s sacked so that he will still be welcome in the society of the good people. The Steward wants to be admired, accepted—and that becomes more important than his honesty, his integrity.

Though the Steward in the story has been given a great trust by his master—he has squandered his opportunity. He is reduced to making himself look good with people. And the master in this final

story—doesn't seem to mind that he was just cheated—he praises the steward's dishonesty, praises him for doing what he needed to do to make sure he was still a part of the elite in society. This master tells his steward that the children of this age are far more shrewd than those pesky Children of Light. They know which way is up. And Jesus has the master conclude by saying, *“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”*

That's the end of the third story.

But Jesus is not finished talking. He may be still addressing his disciples—but he knows the Pharisees are still listening. He interprets this last story for them:

“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

This last statement points out the flaw of the third story, showing it for the falsehood it is.

Why would God give you things that really **are** important—Jesus asks the disciples--if you have showed that you can't be trusted with things that *aren't* important—money, position, respect in the community—all things that the Steward--- and the Pharisees---

believed were the MOST important. God doesn't care about position or respect or money. That is evident from the first two stories about the prodigal son and the lost sheep. How can children of God be entrusted with really important things-- like the kingdom-- when we have proved ourselves dishonest in less?

If we had continued through the next few verses, we would have heard how the Pharisees reacted to this final story:

“And the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this; and they scoffed at him. But he said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men; but God knows your hearts: for what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

There's the rub.

God knows our hearts. God knows that small instances of dishonesty—not just of our money, but in our lives-- lead to bigger ones.

And why do we do it? Because we can't bear to let people know that we have screwed up?

God knows our hearts, and knows exactly what we've done and why. And God loves us anyway—beyond all imagining.

Remember the Prodigal Son. Remember that God will search for us when we've lost our way—even when we really mess up by our own fault. God still welcomes us home. Because to the God of the first two stories, it is not shrewd to traffic in dishonesty—with others or within ourselves—it is shrewd to know we are beloved of God and no one is allowed to be lost forever. Not even the Pharisees. Amen.