

“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.”

Did you ever think you’d hear Jesus say these words? Repeating myself, I’ll again say that when we only read snippets of scripture—we often completely miss the big picture.

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.”

But where does this conversation start? Instead of starting at the beginning of Luke 16—like our gospel does today—let’s go back to the 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 people the Pharisees didn’t think worthy-- sinners. Jesus physically turns to the Pharisees and shares three stories—the story about the lost sheep & lost coin, then the story of the prodigal son.

Jesus’ point: that God’s love *isn’t limited* to the good, rich people who like to hang out with other good, rich people, all the while looking down with judgement and pity on the less fortunate people. Jesus’ first 3 parables describe to the Pharisees that God doesn’t see things the way human beings often do.

Then Jesus physically turns away from the Pharisees and turns toward the disciples and tells them another sort of story—while the Pharisees listen in.

Jesus begins a “parable” 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, this scurrilous fellow 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, rich people. It’s most important to the steward to be admired and accepted—it’s more important than his honesty, his integrity.

Though the Steward in the story has been given a great trust by his soon-to-be-former master—he has squandered his opportunity. He is reduced to making himself an image to *look good* with people.

And the master of this dishonest steward commends this dishonesty. This master tells us that the children of this age are far more shrewd than those pesky *Children of Light*. Dishonest people

know which way is up. And Jesus concludes the “parable” 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.”* I imagine the disciples are trying hard to keep straight faces.

But Jesus-- he is not finished yet. He is still facing his disciples—but he knows the Pharisees are still listening. To make sure they really get it, he interprets the “parable” 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?”

That’s pretty clear, I think. To make it crystal--- he continues...

“You can’t serve two masters. You can’t serve both God and wealth.” Boom. Mic drop.

This last statement shows the third story for the falsehood it is.

If we had continued through the next few verses--which unfortunately the lectionary does not, sadly-- we would have heard how the Pharisees reacted to Jesus’ words:

“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 so why do we do it?

Jesus asks just that question: why would God give us things that really **are** important, the kingdom, everlasting love-- if we have showed that we can’t be trusted with things that *aren’t* important—money, position, respect in the community—all things that the Steward--- and the Pharisees--- (and sometimes us?) believe are the MOST important. God doesn’t care about position or respect or money. God cares about love. God cares about LOST things.

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 three 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.