

A Perplexing Parable

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
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After I read the Gospel text and the concluding declaration that this is “The Gospel of the Lord,” you responded with, “Praise to you, O Christ.” If that response had not been written in the bulletin and appeared as our custom, what would you have said? Remember some of the words of the text? “What will I do... I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed (fired) as manager, people may welcome me into their homes (Luke 16:3-4) “...make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes” (Luke 16:9). What? I don’t get it! The master praised the dishonest steward (Luke 16:8). What’s all this about?

What would you have said if you could have verbalized your own response? I seriously doubt you would have said, “Praise to you, O Christ.” However, you did. What is this parable or story about? Certainly seems like a confusing and perplexing one, doesn’t it?

One of the commentaries I consulted called this story hyperbole. That helps. I like that, for if it’s hyperbole, it can’t mean what it says. It’s an exaggeration. So we are not supposed to take it seriously – or are we? The reading did contain some very powerful words from the Lord Jesus, such as the very conclusion of the reading: You cannot serve God and wealth (Luke 16:13). I might like to dismiss that as mere hyperbole, but that is straight talk! Very understandable, especially so because it is a struggle to keep the Gospel first in our lives every day. It is a struggle to always place the Lord God Almighty first.

The story of the dishonest manager, it appears, speaks of being as zealous for the Lord as the dishonest manager was to save his own skin. The parable tells us that as the dishonest manager used his creative juices for his own protection, we are to use our creative imagination to spread the Gospel of Christ Jesus. As the dishonest manager was very spontaneous in solving his dilemma, so we are to be as spontaneous in our praise of Christ as we say “Thank you” for the forgiveness of our sin.

Are we shrewd witnesses for Christ? Are we clever in giving testimony to the faith within us?

Another parable: after 17 years of marriage, a man dumped his wife for a younger woman. He wanted to continue living in their downtown luxury apartment with his new love, so he asked his wife to move out and get another place. His wife agreed to this, provided that he gives her three days alone in the apartment to pack up her things. She spent the first day packing her belongings into boxes, crates, and suitcases. On the

second day, she had the movers come and collect her things. On the third day, she sat down for the last time at their beautiful dining table by candlelight, put on some soft background music, and feasted on a pound of shrimp and a bottle of Chardonnay. When she finished, she went into each room and deposited a few of the half-eaten shrimp shells into the hollow of the curtain rods. She then cleaned up the kitchen and left.

When the husband returned with his new girlfriend, all was bliss for the first few days. Then slowly the apartment began to smell. They tried everything; cleaning and mopping and airing the place out. Vents were checked for dead rodents, carpets were steamed cleaned. Air fresheners were hung everywhere. Exterminators were brought in to set off gas canisters, during which they had to move out for a few days, and in the end they even paid to replace the expensive carpeting.

Finally, they could not take it any longer and decided to move. They could not find a buyer for their stinky apartment, so they had to borrow a huge sum of money to purchase a new place. The moving company arrived and did a very professional packing job, taking everything to their new home including the curtain rods.

The jilted wife was very clever in her expression of revenge.

Are we as clever in our profession of God's great love? Do we let people know that we are believers? Do we share that we worship the Lord at Augustana Lutheran Church? A recent issue of The Lutheran magazine had a cover story entitled, "A cure for Lutheran laryngitis? How to talk faith" (The Lutheran, August 2007). We could all learn how to be more eager witnesses of the Good News of Christ Jesus so that our sharing would be full of more zeal, imagination, and immediacy. The dishonest steward was very clever in protecting himself. This story calls us to be clever in witness – not sneaky, deceitful, or dishonest. The dictionary defines clever as "original" and "ingenious." That's what this story is calling us to be in our testimony to Christ Jesus.

Pastor Bill White of Bethel Lutheran Church, Madison, Wisconsin, who has been to Augustana as a presenter a few years ago, wrote in the September 5 newsletter of Bethel the following: A high school girl attended a conference in Illinois. When she returned home she told her mother, "Most of the girls at this conference had nothing good to say about religions, and particularly about Christianity. They were brutal to one of the girls who was a Christian. "What about you," the mother asked. "Where they mean to you?" "No," the girl said triumphantly. "No one knew I was a Christian."

He continued. Two men were talking after worship. The first, attending for only the third time, expressed surprise that he has seen no one from their business. "This is a large church," he said. "I thought that some of our people would be here." The second man and member of Bethel quickly mentioned the names of two people who were members of that congregation and employed by the same firm. The visitor said, "Really, I had no idea that either one of them were even Christians."

Not very zealous about the faith. Not very eager to give witness to the love of Christ. Not very creative in their expressions of Christian commitment and devotion. Enough about those people in Bethel's newsletter. The question is ours. What about me?

We are in the second half of the Church Year – the Sundays after Pentecost, called the Church's Half Year. In this Half Year, we are invited to focus on our response to the great love of God in Christ Jesus. Since the Savior was given to us as a gift, how do we respond? By chocking up, remaining silent, and loosing our creativity? Or perhaps can we be as eager as the dishonest manager, but in service of the Lord instead? Can we be as intense about sharing the good news as was the dishonest manager about serving his own needs? Can we use our imagination as cleverly as did the dishonest manager, not to secure a reciprocal debt but rather to serve as instruments of Christ's compassion?

These questions are not just for individuals, but they are addressed to congregations, too. Organizations, including congregations, spend lots of time and energy maintaining themselves – feeding the machine. We enjoy great music here at Augustana, have wonderful educational opportunities for all ages, are proud of the Early Learning Center; we're grateful for the Circles, Prayer Shawl ministry, and all the manifestations of our congregational life. Our challenge is to use our imagination, cleverness, and zeal to share God's word of compassion, mercy, and justice outside of the membership. Have you seen the billboards, newspaper announcements, and bus posters about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – and the banner on the east wall of this building? God's Work. Our Hands. Wonderful declarations of the ministry of the ELCA outside of the maintenance mode. I must ask myself about my zeal and creativity in sharing the Gospel of Christ Jesus. So must Augustana and all congregations. Are we as clever as was the manager in today's parable? Not in a self-serving way but in a Christ-serving way.

Grace has been given in the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus. It is finished and completed. We cannot make grace greater by anything we do. But we can demonstrate our gratitude for God's grace by lives that are given to the living and proclamation of the Gospel and the extension of the Kingdom here and now.

The dishonest manager: hyperbole, exaggeration? Maybe a model for Christian living – a life focused on getting the word of the Lord out right now by all means available. That's the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Amen.