

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

22.09.2019
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Introduction

It seems that in many parts of the world today we are seeing the settled order of things being disrupted by the supposed leaders of society. The surprising thing is how easily disruption can be caused. Something as simple as a tweet that goes viral can raise the temperature of national debate, cause great unease or nervousness and potentially even ignite violent action. The settled order is not as deep rooted as we might consider it to be. So imagine for a moment what it would take to disrupt things in favour of the poor and the marginalised.

Text

Luke 16:1–9

Then Jesus said to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Give me an account of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.”

Then the manager said to himself, “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.”

So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He answered, “A hundred jugs of olive oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.” Then he asked another, “And how much do you owe?” He replied, “A hundred containers of wheat.” He said to

him, “Take your bill and make it eighty.”

And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 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.

Comment

There is a very clear connection here with the parable of the prodigal. In both settings someone is responsible for squandering the wealth of someone else. The Greek word used in both cases is exactly the same and it literally means “they scattered it in all directions” (Luke 15:13; 16:1).

But there’s a reason why this parable is not often preached, and it comes in verse 9. Jesus appears to suggest that we should be shrewd in using our resources to gain friends. It sounds a bit disingenuous doesn’t it? The complexity of the parable means that there is no real consensus on how to handle it, and I certainly don’t propose to resolve the challenge here. And anyway, it is the beauty of stories that they allow us a whole variety of ways of understanding the truths they reveal about the human condition.

One way into this story is to consider the fact that the news comes to the rich man from outside his household, “What is this that I hear about you?” he says (Luke 16:2). It may suggest that the ability of the rich man to control the actions of those in his household is being called into question, and, in an honour/shame culture, to have *other*stalking about you negatively may be a far worse thing than to be losing money. So perhaps one way of reading this parable is to imagine the master feels he is on trial and not the steward. If he is not able to control his household, his family members, his staff, clients or agents he will incur serious stigma in his community for which no amount of money can compensate.

The central issue is therefore the recovery of honour which of necessity means sacking the steward, whether the charges laid against the steward are true or not. In this way he can recover some of the loss of face. The steward knows this and so he decides to act quickly (Luke 16:3). He knows there is not going to be an investigation therefore the actions of the steward are perfectly understandable, everybody would know that this is how a man who is about to be sacked would react. The subsequent actions of the steward change the whole scenario though and serve to heighten the threat to the rich man’s honour. He squanders more money (by releasing debt), but in doing so achieves the acclaim of those who were in debt for much more. This limits the options for the rich man.

If he sacks the manager, who is newly popular, the rich man will lose status. But if he honours the shrewd manager, he can restore his place in the community.

And so the parable swerves in a totally unexpected direction. What should happen now is that the Master acts at the expense of the manager to recover honour, but instead it’s almost as if the Master laughs at the manager’s actions. Indeed he praises the manager for his shrewdness and by doing so he scandalises the listeners who were primed to expect harsh action. Instead the Master praises his social inferior for how he acts and shifts attention from his damaged honour to the apparent success of the manager. In this way the honour/shame code is fractured.

Not only that, but Jesus closing statement seems to place the responsibility for granting an eternal future in the hands of those who are indebted and therefore poor. Their opinion is the one that ultimately matters not that of the ones who the rest of society considers powerful. Therefore, Jesus seems to say, use your resources to benefit the poor.

This parable is a close relation of the parable of the banquet in Luke 14. There too, a rich man steps outside the social codes of the day to do the unexpected.

Jesus's parables do this all the time. A Samaritan acts in a caring way. A father acknowledges his failures and humbles himself before his sons. A wealthy man throwing a party by which he will ensure the indebtedness of his guests ends up inviting a whole host of people who could never repay him.

The Gospel consistently refuses to match our expectations of social and cultural norms, in fact Jesus keeps breaking the social taboos of his day, making space for those who are on the outside and unseating those in power.

His stories serve to unsettle us with their unpredictability and downright inappropriateness. It forces us to think of how often in the practice of our faith as disciples we conform to social norms because that's what's expected of us. How often do we refuse to create a fuss over an injustice because it is unseemly. Seamus Heaney said it best in his 1975 poem "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," speaking of the Troubles,

"The famous
Northern reticence, the tight gag of place
And times: yes, yes. Of the "wee six" I sing
Where to be saved you only must save face
And whatever you say, you say nothing."

We hover, and manoeuvre and dance around the things that must be said but fail to say it because to do so would be to bring the whole edifice of respectability down. Whatever you say, say nothing for fear of bringing the kind of disruptive change the Gospel brings.

So whenever we face a religious pressure to keep a lid on things, it's likely that Jesus would blow the lid off. It was not his way to "say nothing" for the sake of a quiet life or some veneer of respectability. Jesus was a profound disrupter of "the way things are done around here."

Response

It is often said of Jesus that he came to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. In the light of this parable are there aspects of your faith life which have become comfortable, predictable and safe? What if Jesus were to come as a disruptive presence and tell you a story that shocked you. How would that story begin?

Prayer

Lord Jesus

You are the great storyteller
Of unexpected twists
And surprising endings.

Forgive me when I seek
To control the narrative
To order the characters
And keep the drama from their lives.

Open my life to more unpredictable storylines
To more bewildering turns
To more exciting encounters
And more unforeseen outcomes.

And teach me to look there for you,
Popping up in unpredictable places
In dazzling dress
And with confounding figures

Amen