

A Curious Story
Based on Luke 16:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
September 23, 2007

Page 1 of 8

I don't think there is a more difficult passage,
and I am not suggesting that I have it all figured out.

Commentators agree and disagree on its meaning. Mostly they agree that it is confusing.

It is troubling, and I am not going to try and explain it away -
make excuses for the writers – or try to rationalize why Jesus may have told it.

What I would like to do is tell you about it -
and invite us to experience its tension.

First, I would like to tell you something about the culture out of which it comes.

Then, I would like to reflect on how it might speak to us today.

Jesus speaks within a culture that is removed by two thousand years
with an equally vast difference in language from what we have today.

This was the ancient near East
and Jesus stories reflect the situations and circumstances of that time.

He spoke of issues directly related to everyday living.¹

Let's overhear it again:

And he said unto his disciples, "There was a certain rich man, who had a steward;
and the steward was accused of wasting the rich man's goods."

And he called him, and said to him, "How is it that I hear this?
Give an account of your stewardship, for you may no longer be my steward."

This parable involves two persons.

First, is the rich man who had great possessions, and debtors who owed him debts.

Second, is his steward, an employee who was responsible for managing
the possessions, and in particular managing the debts that people owed the rich man.

Here is where ancient culture is important.

This was a common form of management – one everybody would have known.
Under the law, it was not allowed to charge interest, or usury to a debtor who was Jewish.

A Curious Story
Based on Luke 16:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
September 23, 2007

Page 2 of 8

However, there was a loophole. You could have a steward between you and your debtors, who could charge interest, and even usury which means excessive interest.

A master would not be considered guilty of any law broken by the steward.

This leaves an unjust steward free to overcharge the debtor - and even pass a portion of the proceeds on to the master.

Just about everyone was in debt in Nazareth.

This is why Jesus and countless other Jews referred to sin as “debt.”

Indebtedness had become endemic - to the extent that the term “debt” had taken on the meaning of sin before G-d.

Think about the different ways we say The Lord’s Prayer.

Forgive us our trespasses, or forgive us our debts – do you see the tension here and how the language reflected this poignant issue of the time?

The wording of our prayer that we say each week - has deep roots – in early Judea.

The peasants who worked the land owed owners of the land rent in currency (*mammon*) that they could not pay.

Year by year, they handed over much of the produce from their harvests just to be allowed to remain indentured on their land owing more and more *mammon* they did not have.

This burden, this growing amount owed – that could almost never be repaid became a metaphor of alienation from G-d.

As if to say, the more one owed, the farther one was from G-d.

They felt trapped – like perhaps

24% credit card interest and sub prime, interest-only loans.

People prayed for release: ”Forgive us our debts as we.....”

A Curious Story
Based on Luke 16:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
September 23, 2007

Page 3 of 8

If the steward and the master were both unjust
and, it was a culture that was known to continually look for ways
to get around their extensive set of laws –

Wait, is that their culture or ours?

So, the system could benefit master and steward.

Now, if it was the case that the master and the manager, or steward, were unjust,
in “cahoots,” as we might have said where I grew up -
the master would have no reason to be addressing
concerns about the steward’s actions.

However, in this story, Jesus presents a master who appears to be a just person.

The charge against the steward is that he has mishandled,
or squandered, the master’s accounts.

Here we have a master who is honest
and who is requiring a reconciliation of his accounts from the steward
before he dismisses the steward because he “squandered,”
meaning spent excessively, or carelessly, thoughtlessly,
rendering things out of balance.

Here is the cultural context. And, Jesus is contrasting the integrity
that comes from living according to the law – living in a righteous manner
with the excessive desires and misuse that appear to be characteristic of the steward.

Let’s overhear a little more of the story.

Then the steward said to himself, “What shall I do? I cannot dig, and I am ashamed to beg.”
He is concerned only with himself. As the manager, he did not have to do manual labor,
but instead lived off of the excess, that is the usurious interest,
that he charged the master’s debtors.

A Curious Story
Based on Luke 16:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
September 23, 2007

Page 4 of 8

He was expected to charge some interest – for that is the way he was paid.

His downfall was the excessive interest – the usury – that he also charged that was squandered, that was wasteful to the system – and unfair in the economy.

Now he is having to scramble to find a way out of this dilemma.

Up to this point in the story, the unjust steward has been cheating the master's debtors, even though the debtors may have had little or no knowledge of his dishonesty.

He needed a "golden parachute," a solution that would land him safely in a job that was as comfortable and secure as the one he is going to lose.

He has come up with a scheme that will not reveal his dishonesty to the debtors, and do it in a way that will engender trust in him.

Overhearing the story again:

He called everyone of his lord's debtors unto him, and said,

"How much do you owe to my lord?"

And the debtor answered, "A hundred measures of oil."

And the steward said, "Pay fifty."

Then he said to another, "How much to you owe?"

"A hundred measures of wheat." And he said, "Pay eighty."

So, perhaps the steward returned the accounts to their appropriate value, and by doing this, gave up his own usury.

Yet, there is a catch.

He does it in hopes to find favor among the debtors.

And, at the same time cause the master to appear generous.

Note that in Greek, the word used to describe the master is *kurios* which is a word used to describe the master of a large holding as well as a word used to refer to G-d.

A Curious Story
Based on Luke 16:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
September 23, 2007

Page 5 of 8

The steward returned the accounts to their appropriate value.

Is the steward commendable?

There was some wisdom to his solution, even though his actions were self-centered,

We are told that he was commended.

This is the tough part.

Is Jesus commending the steward for his calculating behaviors that were clearly to ingratiate himself with those persons who might assist him in the future?

Was Jesus advocating such calculating behaviors?

And, then I got to thinking about life and people
and how things get done – and the fact there are many contradictions.

I thought about just a few people in recent history.

I was remembering one of my favorite Presidents, Lyndon Johnson.

He was known for shepherding through the Civil Rights Act.

Few politicians are as capable of getting things done.

What a contribution he made to humankind, to civil rights in this country.

And yet, his personal behaviors, his deprecating ways of treating people,
his personal racism – were all meshed together with his sense of destiny and commitment to service.

Then I thought of Richard Nixon, and I worked for Richard Nixon,
whose became possibly the most skilled statesman in international relations
in the last century – in building a relationship with China.

And yet, personally he was so paranoid he had few friends, and could never trust anyone.

He was anti-semitic, and known to lie to those who were closest to him.

And then, I stopped by the Explore Booksellers on Thursday
and picked up Bill Clinton's new book, *Giving: How Each of Us Can Change the World* -
to learn more about the actions of groups of individuals

to create more healthy and just societies with
major efforts in health care for children and adults with AIDS -

A Curious Story
Based on Luke 16:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
September 23, 2007

Page 6 of 8

assisting the very poorest with borrowing money,
micro-lending to create businesses –
and the successes many non-governmental organizations are having
to create healthier and economically just communities -
and he has been a major influence in these efforts.
Knowing at the same time – that he is also responsible for some very base behaviors that
are absolutely nothing I would want to see in a leader, a steward, of any kind.
And yet, there is commendation for all these men.
and they are only three, and they happen to be men in the past thirty years in US politics
that popped into my head pretty fast.

And then I thought of me.

I know there have been contradictions in me, and I know that sometimes my motives
have not always been integral with my actions -
nothing to the extreme – such as the parable – perhaps.
I know there have been times that I contributed money to events
because I wanted my name on the program.
Or, I gave to an organization – sometimes my church
at the last of the year – so it would help with taxes.
Not that it made a difference really – just because I kind of got caught up in it.

Don't get me wrong. Giving in December to the church is a great thing.

That is when many churches get income and expenses balanced.

We welcome it. Please do it.

But I think there is a difference in the people whose lives are enriched
by a spiritual practice, an orientation, of tithing and service -
living out of an orientation of blessing and abundance – keeping the cycle moving.

A Curious Story
Based on Luke 16:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
September 23, 2007

Page 7 of 8

There are the spiritual gifts that come
from life lived where our actions emerge from the call of God
and the claim of spirit in our lives.

That is a different kind of life
and its spiritual gifts far exceed commendation.

But actions themselves can be commendable,
and I am glad they are because there is seldom such a thing as pure altruism.

We struggle here in the leadership of this church,
in the use of this building – when others ask to share our space.

Do we share our worship space, because we want to encourage and grow faithful people?

Or because we can earn money – because sometimes we need money.

In managing a church – questions like that are always presenting themselves to us
and offering us opportunities to grow.

Gary Thomas writes in *Christianity Today*:

Thinking about eternity helps us retrieve perspective.

He says, I'm reminded of this every year when I figure my taxes.

During the year I rejoice at the paychecks and extra income,
and sometimes I flinch when I write out the tithe and offering.

I do my best to be a joyful giver, but I confess it is not always easy,
especially when there are other needs and wants.

At the end of the year, however, all of that changes.

As I'm figuring my tax liability, I wince at every source of income
and rejoice with every tithe and offering check – more income means more tax.

But every offering and tithe means less tax. Everything is turned upside down,
or perhaps, more appropriately, right-side up.

He said, "I suspect Judgment Day will be like that."

A Curious Story
Based on Luke 16:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
September 23, 2007

Page 8 of 8

The definition of steward is a manager of a household or of property.

So, as we practice Christian stewardship, we are stewards –

caretakers or managers -

of G-d's household and property.

I like to think of it as sacred ground.

And that may be what this parable is really about -

about how we struggle to be who we are called to be -

how sometimes we are all too human – and how sometimes we shine.

And when we do – that's when things happen -

that's when connections are made – and people and places find healing -

that is when we become channels for peace and conduits for justice.

That is when we become the stewards we were asked to be in the beginning.

I think the space from which we act matters

some of our actions are commendable,

and sometimes our actions participate in something much greater

and that is what we are looking for.

Amen.

¹ Adapted from the American Journal of Biblical Theology, Dec. 19, 2004.