

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Psalms 79:1-9

1 Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

Well, as you might have noticed from that parable, I had a fun week. That was what I would call a three nights at the coffee house kind of week. And if you found that parable to be at all perplexing like I did, you're not alone. I looked up every commentary I could get my hands on on this thing. And every single one of them began with something like, "Without a doubt, one of the most bewildering," "One of the most confusing." One called it "Downright strange." My favorite was, "It is one of the great exegetical mountains of scripture."

I got so desperate, I asked Father Bill, "Have you ever preached on this thing?" He said, "Yeah, I did but I can't really remember." In other words, 'm not going to help you. I'm kidding. But he did say, "Go look up Amy-Jill Levine. She is a New Testament professor at Vanderbilt." And Bill said, "You know, I think she had a pretty brilliant take if I remember correctly." So I did. I looked her up and here is what she said, "This parable defies any fully satisfactory explanation." Thank you, Father Bill.

But all of this, I think, is a great reminder that these parables are really not meant to be straightforward. And that is kind of 21st Century, right-brained Americans, we have a tendency to want to have them figured out. To figure out, translate it for us, give us the message that's there because there's one, isn't there? Or we try to turn them into allegories. We try to match up the characters, okay, who's God, which one is Jesus, which one represents me and that kind of thing. And they're really not meant to be that either.

For me, parables are very much like scripture itself. They're stories to be prayed over, to be argued with, to return to over and over again over the course of lives as we grow, and mature and change. Somebody described the moments as if they were a diamond; each time reflecting something a little different as you turn it. Reflecting a little bit of the surroundings, a little bit of ourselves, yet still revealing a beautiful truth within.

And I think that we can also struggle with them the most when their messages are the most challenging. The protagonist here is a financial manager. He acts as a kind of middleman between wealthy landowners and those who live and farm the land. They weren't the most scrupulous people to begin with. They hid interest charges which were illegal under the Torah. They were known to roll the interest into the principal, so you really didn't know what was owed and they were known to line their own pockets and live pretty well.

But in any event, we are told that he has been charged with squandering his master's wealth. Do we know if the charges are true? We really don't. We don't hear his response. We only know that the master is going to fire him and is demanding a kind of final accounting. And this, of course, throws the manager into a panic. He's never had to do manual labor. He's too proud to beg. Life on the streets for him will be, basically, a death sentence.

So proving, once again, that necessity is the mother of invention, he comes up with an idea. “While I still have time,” he thinks. “I’ll ingratiate myself to my master’s debtors by slashing their bills, so that maybe, just maybe, they might welcome me into their homes when I’m on the street.” At this point, some of the interpreters of this parable managed to turn the manager into a kind of whistleblower, calling out an unjust system of usurious interest and exploitation, a kind of Robin Hood stealing from the rich so that he can give to the poor.

And while I love this idea I struggle with it because the manager’s motivations that we just heard seemed pretty self-centered to me. Our executive assistant, Meredith Skowronski, I think she had the best suggestion for me this week. She said, “Maybe he’s like Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who took control of the formerly Jewish-owned factory ceased by the Nazis and amassed fortune building Hitler’s war machine on the backs of cheap Jewish labor.

A member of the Nazi party, a womanizer, a gambler, someone who enjoyed living the high life. He was an unlikely hero at best, but at some point, he had a change of heart. Whether it was to save his own skin, to avoid being charged as a war criminal, whether it was because of his personal friendships with Jews as a child, or whether it was from witnessing the atrocities of the SS first hand. His motivations are still debated to this day. But at some point, he increasingly began to see his factory as a place to employ as many Jews as he could in order to save them from concentration camps and certain death.

We’ve seen God work with mixed motives before, have we not? The parable of the prodigal son, which directly precedes this one, also features someone who squandered their wealth and is now broke and desperate. As with our manager, the prodigal son’s decision to return home really is about self preservation as well if you think about it and if you read closely. He’s out of money. He’s reduced to feeding pigs and he, too, says, “I know what I’ll do. I’ll go home. I’ll offer the most religious sounding apology I can come up with. I’ll even practice it and maybe, just maybe, I’ll be received as one of the farm hands and at least have a roof over my head.”

And I don’t know about you, but I actually loved the idea that God can use mixed motivations, even self serving ones. I can certainly relate to that. When I think about my good deeds that I do and really reflect, I have mixed motivations in virtually all of them. When I help a stranger in public, I do it because, yeah, it’s the right thing to do. It’s a way of being Christian to a stranger and I want to set a good example for my girls. When I give 10 percent of my income back to this church, I do it because it is a spiritual practice that helps me put God first in my life. And I happily take that tax break every year.

I made a pledge to the capital campaign because I believe in the mission of this church to change lives who will one day change this world. And I know that I can’t ask others to do something that I have not done myself. But whatever the mixed motivations might be here today with our manager, when the master learns of his schemes, he doesn’t beat him, he doesn’t have him arrested. What does he do? He commends him for his shrewdness, for his machinations, for his cleverness.

And again, it surprises us in the same way that the elder son is surprised when the father celebrates the return of the prodigal son. What? That's not how the world is supposed to work. Isn't there supposed to be punishment here? Shouldn't there be a price to be paid? And we would be correct. That is the way the world works. But it's not the way the kingdom of God works. And that's why I think Jesus says to us to be like that manager.

He's learned firsthand that the ways of the world, the pecking orders of wealth and privilege would not sustain him. For him, the gig is up. The ride is over. The money has finally failed him, as Jesus warns us, it will do. And so in desperation, he stumbles, if you will, into the one useful purpose of money; to help others, to build relationships that will never fail him.

Consider again Oskar Schindler. He lied. He traded on the black market. He bribed SS officers. He falsified reports. Even risking prison. He sacrificed his factory's profits. His own personal fortune, even, so that he could employ, and shield and protect as many Jews as he could possibly afford. So by the end of the war he was utterly broke but it managed to save 1,100 lives.

After the war, he was a man with no money and also no home. He wasn't safe in post war Germany because he had testified against Nazis. And he wasn't welcomed in the United States because he had been one. He settled in South America where he was financially supported by the relatives of the people he saved and by Jewish relief organizations, who supported him the remainder of his life and they never forgot him, and they never failed him.

Jesus calls us in the same way. Make friends with our worldly wealth so that when it is gone we might be welcomed into eternal homes. I think that is a wakeup call, again, for all of us. Why He asks, are the children of light not as ingenious, not as resourceful, not as shrewd as this dishonest manager who stumbled into helping others on trying to save his own skin?

Shouldn't those of us who have heard the gospel, shouldn't we be even more determined? Shouldn't we be even more resourceful, more shrewd? Shouldn't we be the ones setting the example? The manager had to learn this lesson the hard way. But surely we've heard over and over again from Jesus over our lives, we cannot serve both God and money. Or have we become a bit like the Pharisees who began as religious leaders and teachers of God's law, but over time, without probably even noticing became so immersed in the culture of wealth and privilege that they had become blind to their love of money?

Charitable giving studies that you see today bear Jesus out in many ways. At a recent conference I learned that Christians give between two and two and a half percent of their income each year to charity, but it's basically a little more than what non-Christians give. Some studies say it's the same. Some studies show we do a percent better.

At the end of the month, this church, Christ Church Cranbrook will be modeling the shrewd use of resources as we reorganize and rearrange our meeting rooms and offices so that we can shelter some 20 or 30 homeless families, including as many as 14 children. We use our resources to help make a difference in the lives of those families for those two weeks. That

is an important mission. But our purpose also is to inspire each of us in our own lives, in our personal lives to be just as shrewd, as conflicted in our motives as we can be, as imperfect in our efforts and in our plans that we might be, how might we rearrange our time and our priorities to live more simply so that others might simply live? How might we repurpose what we own, our homes, our cars, our bank accounts for the kingdom of God?

At the end of the film Schindler's List, the war is over and the 1,100 men, women and children he saved have gathered outside of the factory to bid him farewell and to say thank you. And they present him with a gift; a ring with an inscription from the Talmud that says, "He who saves the life of one, saves the world entire." And as he savors the moment, he stares out at the faces of those gathered and his eyes are drawn to the car that he's about to depart in. And it hits him. Why did I hold on to that car? I didn't need it. I could've sold it. I could've saved 10 more people.

And he turns to the [inaudible 16:19]. "This is made of gold. Why didn't I sell this, too? I could've saved one. Maybe two more." And then he collapses to the ground on his knees, under the weight of the realization of how much of his life he had squandered living so large and then the realization of how many more lives he might have saved. I think that is the question that Jesus is challenging us this morning with this oh-so-challenging parable. When our money fails us, when our time as the manager is up, how many lives will we have touched with the love of God? How many lives did we save? Amen.

[End of Recording]