

Our parable from today's gospel
is probably one of the most difficult stories
that Jesus ever told.

It is the tale of the dishonest steward.
This steward is one of those dramatic rogues
that Jesus seems to commend.

Most of us don't know what to make of him or his story.

Here is a manager for a rich man's property
who has been about looking after his own interests.
The rich man summons the steward and fires him.

Then the steward goes out
and really starts to hustle for himself.

He is a schemer, a conniver; he is just like us.

"How much do you owe my master?"

he asks of one of those in debt to the rich man,

"A hundred jugs of olive oil." the debtor answers.

"Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty."

says the steward.

What a scam!

This guy knows how to work an angle.

Doesn't he sound like some of the lobbyists

who hold down government jobs

and then make millions in private industry?

Yet what really shatters this story,

is that not only does the rich man

commend this crook for acting shrewdly,

but then Jesus says that

unless you have been faithful with dishonest wealth

who will entrust to you the real riches.

The question today is,

"Do your hustle and scheme to save your soul?"

Do you work at your spiritual life?

As someone once said about this parable,

"Why would Jesus commend a crook?"

But if we are honest about it,

we will have to admit that there is something
about the J.R.s and Tony Sopranos of this world
that we seem to admire.

They know how to get things done.

They know how to use their time.

They get what they really want to get
even if they have to bend the rules to get it.

Do you have the spiritual life that you want?

How is it with your soul?

This is a parable about cleverness.

Have you been clever about developing
and protecting your spiritual life?

Now all of us good, law-abiding, non-conniving types
ought to take a lesson from this scoundrel of this parable.

It is as if this parable offers us a new beatitude :

“Blessed are the clever.”

I think that what Jesus is after in today's gospel
is that he wants us to be able to use everything in us,
our time and talent even our scheming
so that this broken world
can be touched by God's love.

He wants us, like the dishonest steward,
to seize every opportunity, to use the time we have,
to bring the Kingdom of God into our lives
and the lives of those around us.

Jesus wants us to scheme about our spiritual lives.

Maybe, this parable isn't about money at all.

Maybe, the money is only a distraction.

Our eyes, like the eyes of the Pharisees, go for the money,
with the cleverness of the steward who is able
to get something for nothing by going around
and making deals for himself.

We are entranced by the cleverness of the steward
because we are more interested in scheming and money

than almost anything else.
Perhaps, money and cleverness
are not the ultimate issues here,
any more than wasting money was the issue
in the parable of the prodigal son which precedes this one.
Maybe, this parable is about using the time that we have
to do what needs to be done.

The dishonest steward knew that he didn't have forever.
For all the bad that the dishonest steward does,
he has one redeeming quality --
he has a sense of how much time he has --
and he does what he can to redeem his situation
in the time that is available.

The steward realizes that he does not have forever.
Perhaps, we could benefit from such an awareness.

This morning we are talking
about a kind of spiritual entrepreneurship.
Heaven is not designed for bureaucrats
who just go be the rules,
who never sense the immediacy of their situation.
Business as usual just won't do in the spiritual life.
Sometimes you have to grab to have a moment for your soul.
This sounds like I am advocating
a kind of "hustling for your soul"
Well, lots of people have struggled with this text before me!

Now each fall most pastors preach about stewardship,
and of course their congregation's eyes go glassy
because they're afraid the church will somehow
reach into their pockets when they're not looking
and take more than they are ready to give.
We think of stewardship
in terms of the money we give to the church.
But stewardship is far more radical, far more fundamental
than the pledge we make to the church,

or the money we drop in the plate on Sunday morning.
Stewardship is what we do with the time we have!
It is how we spend our lives.
We have been given our lives to use them as we choose.
How are your choices lately?
That is really what stewardship is all about.

My stewardship story of a hustler for heaven today
is the story of John Wesley.
Before John Wesley became the founder
of the Methodist Church he was a teacher at Oxford University back in
the 1700's. When he began his career he was paid 30 pounds per year ~
in those days a lot of money.
His living expenses were 28 pounds ~
so he gave 2 pounds away.
The next year his income doubled through lectures ~
but he still managed to live on 28 pounds ~
so he gave away 32 pounds. The third year he earned 90 pounds ~ lived
on 28 ~
and gave away 62. The fourth year he earned 120 pounds ~ lived on 28 ~
and gave away 92. One year his income was a little over 1,400 pounds ~
he lived on 30 and gave away nearly all of the 1,400 pounds.
Wesley hustled in a way that is quite foreign to many of us.
He felt that with increasing income, what should rise
is not the Christian's standard of living
but the standard of giving. Increasing our standard of giving.
What a great theme and what a great lesson he taught us
for our stewardship.
You need your wits about you for this life of ours.
Both for the material life and the spiritual life.
Of course, in the end it is always God's mercy,
like the mercy of the rich man,
and not our wit or our persistence or even our scheming
or even our choices about how we use our time
that will determine how things work out.

“God, have mercy on us.”

But this parable though strange
is not too foreign to our experience. Aren't we always reading about some
computer whiz kid

who breaks the code, invades the corporate computer of AT&T
and gets the company to deliver over a million dollars
of advanced computer equipment, and what happens?

He gets hired by Mom Bell.

Make sense of that!

Today, Jesus is saying the Kingdom of God is like that.
He sees more room in the kingdom for those who go for it ~
for this gift of life and the possibility of love of others ~

those who make radical choices
about how they will use their time ~
than in those who too easily take the pink slip
and go their way.

John Wesley's example, perhaps, can show us the way.

In the parable the master commends the steward
for his cleverness.

But the stress in this parable
is not only on the steward's determined scheming,
but on the master's mercy, as well.

Grace is, as it were, the context of this grab.

Isn't it hard to put those things together -- Grace and Grab?

It is God's mercy by which we are always surrounded
that makes it possible for us to go out and try to scheme
and grab our way through this strange and challenging world that we
find ourselves in.

A Tony Soprano for the spiritual life?

Doesn't seem quite right, does it?

Make no mistake about it,
this steward is one of Jesus' rogues.

He is like the lazy neighbor
who pulls the covers over himself at midnight,

or the man who hides a treasure unearthed on another's land.

Jesus seemed indifferent to the normal, social morality
displayed by these characters.

Let us not forget

that in the midst of all our cunning and clever ploys

to seize the moments of our lives,

we rest on the promise of grace and mercy.

Aren't we always doing a balancing act

between realizing our own life,

individually and with each other,

and living toward some notion of something beyond ourselves

that is modeled after the life of Jesus

or some other storied presence.

Wayne Dyer was on PBS recently calling it "Source",

I guess that goes down a little easier for some these days.

It can't be confused with the fundamentalist Christian Right! But, what

he was talking about is the stuff we talk about too.

In the movie E. T.,

there is all kinds of scheming and conniving going on.

Elliot and his crew protect their friend

with courage and abandon.

They seize this mystery that presents itself to them. They pedal their bikes

like mad.

And then as the movie moves towards its conclusion,

they can only trust the love between themselves and E.T.

as he sails away.

E. T. says "come" and Elliot says, "stay."

They hold on, doing all that they can for each other,

letting things be what they can be.

But in the end, there's only that rainbow between them

and the confidence that they are both part of something

much bigger than themselves.

Something of that happened to me when our Bishop after 9/11

asked us to take Muslim families shopping for food.

There was something in that request
that had a piece of a rainbow about it.

So we like the wily, dishonest steward,
act as if everything, everything,
depends upon what we are able to scam and scheme,
about the way we spend our time.

We are not such different creatures, after all,
and that is why the parables of Jesus still speak to us.

But in the end, in our depths,
in the very midst of our seizing the day,
we find ourselves, we hope and pray,
held in an eternal mercy, an eternal embrace.
How we use our time, how we grab amidst the grace
may be, after all, what Jesus is telling us today.
“God have mercy on us.”

Amen.