

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

We have had some interesting and challenging parables from Jesus lately. And it's not over yet. Next week we get the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. But, as our Lord said, [D]o not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today¹." And parable-wise today there is plenty of trouble.

New Testament scholars and commentators routinely talk about the parable of the "dishonest manager" as one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables. But I'm not ready to give up on this story. I believe it can speak to us about some important issues. And as I told you last week, we need to remember that every parable has multiple layers, which allow them to connect with us differently in different times and situations.

As I was reading materials on the Gospel this week, I was struck by something I had never before read in this parable. It starts this way ...

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 accounting of your management, because *you cannot be my manager any longer*.'" "

Let's look at what is said – and what is not said – in that introduction.

First, charges were *brought* to the rich man. Jesus did not say that the charges were *true* – or even that there was any evidence that the charges were true – He only says

¹ Matthew 6:34 (NRSV)

that charges were brought. And after these seemingly unsubstantiated charges were brought, what did the rich man do? He immediately fired the manager. He did ask for an accounting, but he fired him first. Setting aside rule #1 from the MBA's management book: that you should *never* fire someone and *then* ask them for an accounting, it appears from this close reading that there is a case to be made for the fact that the manager is the victim here, not the rich man. It appears that the manager may be a victim of "guilt by innuendo."

Now the other interesting thing is: the "charges" that were brought against him were not for theft or misappropriation, but for "squandering." That *could* simply mean that the manager: overpaid workers, or made investments that didn't pay off very well. There is nothing in this introduction that says that when the rich man fired the manager the man had done anything worthy of being fired.

If we look at the parable this way, suddenly we have a different vision of what Jesus might have been saying to His first audience – and what He might be saying to us. Reading this story as we usually do makes it hard for us to connect with the character of the manager, because most of us have never stolen money from our employer and then had to figure a way out of the jam. But if we look at the manager as someone who has been fired because of possibly unsubstantiated rumors circulated about him, then we have a greater connection to him and to his very difficult situation.

Have people ever spread a rumor about you that was not true? Have you ever listened to a secondhand tale about yourself – with mouth agape – because what you were hearing was not only false, but actually was not even related to the truth at all? Almost all of us have, at one time or another. Back in our junior high and high school days we were almost all talked about behind our backs – and typically the things said about us were not based in fact, or were only loosely so. Now ... have you ever been the victim of unsubstantiated rumors that resulted in problems in your job? That's a much bigger issue.

Let me tell you a story. There once was a priest. He was the head of a small congregation where everyone knew each other – and *thought* they knew each other's business as well. Things rocked along at this small church, as things typically do at small churches – no big gains and no big losses. But then one day rumors started to circulate about financial matters – both the church's finances and the priest's own. And nothing riles people up quite like rumors of money problems – it's been that way since at least the time of the manager in Jesus' parable.

Well, the things that were said were never very detailed ... false rumors seldom are. Instead, innuendo was the name of the game. Some people began to say that the church was in trouble because all of its money was gone and it couldn't pay its bills. That quickly proved to be wrong, but no one ever stepped forward and cleared the record. Then the priest heard the rumor that he was being paid almost twice as much as was

actually the case. Again untrue, but a matter of record for anyone who cared enough to see the truth – although no one ever checked. After that, the rumor was that he was allowing *just anyone* to see the church’s confidential financial information. Another rumor with no basis in fact, but one that was impossible to disprove. Then came the bombshell ... rumor had it that the priest was not capable of handling his own personal finances, because the congregation had – out of the goodness of people’s hearts – *offered* to help him with some extraordinary expenses. This last one – which again was not true at all – was sufficient to make some people incredibly angry, to the point that they either stopped attending church or stopped giving to the church, or both.

So what was the priest to do? Not one of these rumors – or the dozens of other, *non*-financial rumors – was true. But how was the priest to fight back? Here is where Jesus had something important to tell His listeners. When the manager heard the rumors flying around about him and when the boss fired him without even hearing his side of the story, the manager became shrewd and took action to prepare for his own future. He made friends of the rich man’s debtors so that he wouldn’t land with such a bump when he was kicked out. What he did was prepare a sort of first century Israel version of a golden parachute. And the master congratulated him on his shrewdness. Jesus told His listeners: “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” True words, those. But again, what about the priest in my story?

Well ... he hadn't been fired, so even if one had been available, the golden parachute idea didn't make any sense. No, his problem came from the damage done to his reputation and his ministry by false statements being made about him, and the equally disturbing fact that no one was interested in setting the record straight. But more importantly, because people are always more ready to believe the worst about someone than they are to believe the best, once rumors have been circulated, the damage often *cannot* be undone.

St. Paul – in his pastoral letter to Timothy – gave the priest the only answer he had to this problem, when he said:

[I] urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for ... [all those who exercise any sort of power over us], so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, there are many messages contained in Jesus' parables. It would have been easy this morning to tell you about using the "filthy money" of this age for godly purposes – as the dishonest manager did. But Jesus tells us unexpected things when He speaks as well. And I truly believe that this message is contained in this parable;

Do not *ever* engage in rumor or innuendo spreading. They *never* work toward furthering the Kingdom of God. They only do damage.

Do not ever believe for even a minute that you know someone else's circumstances. You do not. You know only part of what can be seen and none of that which is not visible.

And finally ... when you hear someone spreading rumors about someone else, whether it is about a public figure or someone you know, refuse to hear what they have to say ... and tell them *why* you are not listening:

because you are trying to live in a way that, “is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Amen