

## Sermon: September 22, 2019- The "Dishonest Manager"

St. Augustine has been credited with saying, "That God gave us people to love and things to use, and that original sin manifests itself when we confuse the two, when we love things and use people." One question I am often asked is how do you define sin? In this case sin, according to Augustine, is defined as those things that breakdown our relationships with God; specifically, by using people to get more of the things we love, rather than using what we have to love others.

Now a conversation about sin might seem a bit off topic for today; it may seem that I am avoiding what is known as one of the hardest passages in Luke to preach by evoking the words of a Saint, but truthfully, I am not avoiding' instead I am highlighting what I believe is the root of Jesus intent with this parable. It opens up a conversation about wealth and faith.

When I was about twelve years old, I spent the summer mowing grass for my grandparents and for some of my neighbours. I think I received two dollars per mow. And I had a plan for that money. There was a video game that I desperately wanted. I had been reading about it in my Nintendo Power magazine. It had great reviews, was fun to play, and importantly had a story line that lasted for hours. I wanted that game a lot. So, I went to work and all summer mowed and saved,

and saved and mow until the day came when I had enough. That day my mother took me to Zellers, you might remember Zellers, kind of a one stop shop and a grabbed a copy of that game and proceeded to the check out line and stood patiently waiting to spend my hard-earned money.

If you remember Zellers, what you might recall was that every Zellers had a little cafeteria style restaurant. It was open to the rest of the store except for a half wall that divided it from the racks of clothes and other items. In the Zellers that we went to, the restaurant was right next to the check out line. And so, as you stood in line you could see and smell the food and the people eating there. But that day it wasn't the food that caught my attention, instead it was mother and her three children. They were standing on the outside of the restaurant looking in and the kids kept say things like, "Mommy we are hungry," "Mom can we please get something to eat." Now of course children say that all the time, my kids have told me they are hungry after eating a whole pot of spaghetti, but these kids meant it. They not only said they were hungry, but they looked it as well. And the mother seemed anxious as she frantically dug through her purse desperately looking for what I assumed was a little bit of money to help feed her kids.

As I watched this, I could feel the weight of the game in my hands, the price tag said \$45, more than enough to feed that entire family. I heard the woman in front of me in line says, "Someone should help those kids," and I knew what should do; I knew that the right thing to do was to put the game down and give the money to the family; but when the clerk said next, I looked at the game, something I wanted so badly and worked so hard for, I couldn't let it go; I bought the game. And after buying it I walked past the family; further ignoring their need and went home and played it. Now its easy for us to day yes but you were only twelve years old, its not your responsibility to buy that family and meal. But according to St. Augustine I had sinned.

I hadn't sinned because I had the money, or because I hadn't seen the need, I sinned because I put more value on a thing, rather than people in need. Now at the age of the 12 I moved past this moral dilemma quite easily. I was happy to have the game; in fact, I hadn't thought about that family once since then. But this week, as I read this passage in Luke, that memory came flooding back. Sure, I had worked hard for that money and deserved the game, but the reality is I have no idea where that game is today. I cannot recall if I actually beat that game. In all likely hood I probably played it for a couple of months and then put it in a drawer and forgot all about it. That game meant nothing to me, it didn't

change my life, or alter my destiny, it was just a thing; but that meal would have, not could have, but would have meant the world to that family.

That is the importance of our passage today. The relationship that we have with wealth and with others, and how our faith informs those relationships. Now at first, its hard to get to that conclusion with this passage because the parable about the dishonest or shrewd manager, is a tough one. Without question it is one most complicated parable we have from Jesus. Part of what makes it complicated is that it ends in a way none of us would anticipate. This dishonest manger knows he is going to be fired and attempts to save himself by forgiving the debts owed to his master, in the hopes that when he is fired those who had their debts forgiven would remember him and care for him. It's a pretty bold move, shrewd at best using others to defend your livelihood and one that could easily have backfired, but oddly enough when his master hears of it, instead of firing him or worse, he commends him for being so shrewd.

That is a bit of head scratcher, but so is what Jesus says after it, "I tell you," he says, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes." Frankly I don't understand what Jesus was trying to say in that moment; maybe you had to be there, to see

how he said it, or to see the subtle facial expressions connected to it. Those words like the parable are complex, but thankfully Jesus doesn't stop with those words, he says more , "No slave can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Easy enough we think, your either rich or faithful, but cannot be both. But its no that easy, this complicated parable asks us to dig deeper to understand our relationship with wealth and other people and how those relationship are informed by God

And how we can do that is by looking at the context of this parable. The context of this parable is that it is spoken to a crowd of people that find themselves in two niches of society, the incredibly rich and incredibly poor. There was no middle point; people either owned the wealth, or worked to provide the wealth. Equally important is to point out that of those incredibly rich was a group of Pharisees who were present and we know there present because this parable belongs to a grouping of five parables that Jesus uses when he is confronted by them.

In Luke 15, we hear that a group of Pharisees confront Jesus, and particularly confronts the fact that he is eating and socializing with outcasts and

sinners. These were people of whom the pharisees considered to not be in relationship with God, because they did not have the means to be in relationship with the institution of the temple. Its important to understand that at this time a relationship with God came through being able to contribute to the work of the temple, which more often then not meant placing one's wealth into the coffers. The response to this group of pharisees Jesus gives is to tell three parables that are quite familiar to us, the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Many feel that that is the end of his response, that what seems lost God seeks out, but other scholars have suggested that the next two parables are also part of that response two parables that begin in the same way with the words, "There was a rich man."

I think it important to remind everyone that the strength of a parable as a mode of teaching is that it is the people's story. A parable connects with those that are listening to it, those that can hear their own lives described in its words. It's not that you necessarily place yourself in it, but that within it you can hear your experience. But equally important parables were meant to connect the ordinary ways of life with the extraordinary nature of God which is evident in the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son. In all of those parables Jesus describes our relationship with God as being like one who never ceases to stop

looking for the lost item and upon finding that which was lost, celebrates abundantly. In other words, one's relationship with God is not defined by how much I can offer but is defined by a God who refuses to give up on me and refuses to not have a relationship with me.

But then we have this parable and another that we will hear next week, that talk about the "rich" and how their wealth blinds them to God who seeks them out. Scholars have suggested that the parable of the dishonest manger in all of its complication is actually Jesus' way of pointing out to the Pharisees and other's among them who found themselves to be part of the upper echelon of society along with those who are poor as poor can be that wealth is not a condition of God love, but that wealth instead should be used not to separate, but to serve.

To serve God means to live the life that Jesus shows us, to love one another as you love yourself. In my mind and heart what that means is not that you need to sell off all your possessions and to give everything away, but instead it is to determine what is most important to you in life, the things that you can have or the relationships that can form between you and others by sharing whatever wealth you do have. And its not just money, you can be an incredibly poor, but

have a wealth of grace to share. Wealth is simply the abundance of what we have. A wholly hat even. And Jesus is asking us to examine our relationship with that abundance, with our wealth; asking to pay attention to whether we serve God or our wealth.

This manager, as shrewd as he is, because he crosses the established norms of the day, uses what he has access to which is forgive debts as means yes, or protecting himself, but also in building relationships. Now its not perfect or ideal, but it hints at what Jesus asks. Think back to my little story, that game I wanted to badly, could easily have been attained months later as birthday gift or Christmas gift or many other ways, but in that moment I was blinded by my wealth which enable to buy it right then and there, that ignored a chance to help another. Whether you are rich or poor, none of us should ever be blinded to needs of others. For when we live as Jesus shows, our wealth, our abundance, whatever that may be, should serve us all by being used to serve God, by bringing life and love to the world. May it be so with us always. Amen.