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Luke 16:1-13

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Ingenuity

Summer of stories. We have been studying some of Jesus's stories, called parables, over the last few weeks. We began with the story in Matthew 18 of the unforgiving or unmerciful servant, in which we explored the difficulty and hard work of forgiveness. In our second week on the 4th of July, we looked at Matthew 19 and 20, in which Jesus uses generosity as the intersection between the rich young man, the disciples, and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Last week, we discussed Luke 15, in which Jesus tells three parables about rejoicing in finding what has been lost. In those 3 stories, Jesus asks us if we have room to include in our stories the most vulnerable people in our world today.

In our fourth week, this morning, Jesus asks us to consider another story, another parable. In Luke's gospel chapter 16, this story follows directly after last week's group of 3. A rich person is made aware that one of his servants who is managing his property is actually squandering it, the same word used for the younger son, who squandered his inheritance. The rich person asks the servant for an account of his activities and lets the servant know that he will no longer have his position. The servant, stressed by this looming end to his work and the even larger problem of how he is going to take care of himself, calls the borrowers, whose debts he manages. When he meets with each debtor, the servant lowers the debt amount so that the borrowers hopefully will welcome him into their homes when he is out of work. The property owner finds out about what the manager, in his desperation, has done and commends him for his

clever or shrewd actions. And that is how the story ends. We do not find out if the servant-manager keeps his position because of these actions or if the debtors take him in later after the rich person fires him. We are left with Jesus's note at the end of the story that the children of this age are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.

My message title this morning is ingenuity, a trait ascribed often to people who are creative, inventive, clever, or original in their work activities. In our parable this morning, the servant's ingenuity comes through in him finding a creative solution to the situation that has developed. But can we really commend him for cheating the property owner? Wasn't what he did wrong in changing what was rightfully owed to the rich person? Is Jesus really saying that being dishonest is ok if the situation may call for it? Is the servant's boss commending how the servant has broken the trust between them? Or maybe trust has already been broken because of the accusations against the servant, so the rich person is commending him for creatively making the best of his looming predicament. I think Jesus's notes after the story clarify that showing yourself to be trustworthy and faithful are important values of God's kingdom, but how does this story help us understand these character traits better?

What are we to make of such a story? I wish that I could tell you that there are just a few background details that we are missing, and that those details will clear up our confusion. If there is anything consistent in the commentaries that I referenced, it is the inconsistency of how this parable is interpreted. Now when I mention this inconsistency, does that mean that just any interpretation is possible? Of course not! We do our best to make the most of the insights and background that we have so that we can hopefully get closest to what Jesus might have meant in the first century. We are going to explore several different ways that I have found to be compelling interpretations of this story, while still holding these insights loosely.

First, some scholars have focused on the culture of managing someone's property in the first century. It was common for stewards or managers of property to add their own interest onto the debts that were owed to their masters so that they could not only make back what was owed to the property owner but also make some extra for themselves. Scholars have noted that the value of what is removed from each debt is the same, so half of the amount of oil and one fifth of the amount of wheat would have been worth the same amount in the marketplace, leading some to think that this might have been the servant's standard fee on each of his master's debts. Taking into account this background material, then maybe what the manager has actually done when cutting back the amounts owed for the debtors is removed his portion of the interest so that what the borrowers owe is only what is due to the property owner. Then when the manager or servant is fired, the property owner will never know how much he had been extorting from the peasants, and the peasants would feel a sense of gratitude to this servant for lowering their debts. The servant will then have people who may welcome him into their homes later. When under pressure by the present situation and motivated by the wrong reasons, the ways of the kingdom can still shine through as the manager does the right thing and relief is felt by both property owner and borrower. If this is the best way of understanding this story, why is the manager still called dishonest even after he does the right thing in removing his interest from the debt? Would this be shrewd behavior? Or right or good behavior as a steward of someone else's resources?

In another way of reading the story, we see the truly ingenious or shrewd nature of the servant's actions by putting his master in a bind. By lowering the debts of the peasants, he has not only ingratiated himself but also gained honor and respect for the rich person because the borrowers are also thankful for the mercy that the property owner has shown them. The master commends the servant for his wisdom in this regard because both the managing servant and the

rich person are saved from dishonor and shame even though the servant has truly been both dishonest and unfaithful with someone else's property. But what can the rich person do now? He looks like the hero for providing debt relief. Even in quietly firing the servant, all parties have wound up winning. If we read the story this way, who is really faithful or dishonest? Maybe we could say that the servant is still dishonest and not to be trusted, but that does not mean that he should not have a place to sleep and eat, which is what he is seeking by relieving the debt of the people who might soon be taking care of him. But if every managing servant did this, business would not be sustainable. Maybe this particular situation doesn't give us a general rule to follow.

Some scholars have pointed out how we all are like the dishonest servant. We have been entrusted by God as God's image-bearers, reflections of who God is in our world. We are stewards of all that God has provided for us. In this sense, we are all servants who are managing the resources that have been entrusted to us: time, money, talents, gifts, and property. One day, God will call all of us into account, and we will have to answer for the ways that we have not always been faithful or honest with what God has entrusted us with. In this sense, God is asking us to be creative, cunning, shrewd, clever, or wise in the ways that we live into this new kingdom that has begun with Jesus. This way of thinking though kind of falls apart when we begin trying to understand how we could relieve other peoples' debts to God or our own debts. Does this theory make sense when we think about the servant has been squandering the rich person's property? Are we consistently squandering God's resources and property? We need ingenuity in how we live into God's kingdom and engage in this broken world, but we must be careful how far we take some of these stories and how they tell us to live.

I will offer one other way of reading the story that highlights the context a little more. Both the disciples and Pharisees are tuning in to this story. Just before this story, Jesus has asked

his audience if there is room in their worldview for the orphan, the widow, or the stranger by telling the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost child. Maybe what we are hearing in this parable is Jesus calling the Pharisees and disciples to a different kind of faithfulness to God's covenant and God's law. Remember that the Pharisees were convinced that they were the true and faithful followers of God's covenant in the first century. They were engaging as best that they could with a world dominated by the Roman empire. They were oppressed and marginalized by Roman governors and soldiers who were to keep the peace. Maybe being faithful for them as heirs of God's covenant is creatively using the wealth that they have accrued by engaging in the Roman marketplace to relieve the poverty all around them among their Jewish brothers and sisters. Rather than tithing their spices and criticizing Jesus for eating with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus is calling them to use their dishonest wealth to truly love their neighbor as themselves. Maybe Jesus mentions dishonest wealth because the Pharisees have accrued their resources by acquiescing with an empire that has made a mockery of their culture and their god. Rather than lording their wealth over their also oppressed Jewish neighbors, they could cleverly and creatively use their wealth to make friends with those on the bottom of the empire. Then when the empire crumbles and the dishonest wealth is gone, they are welcomed by their neighborhood brothers and sisters. As Jesus has already said, when the last become first, when the widow, orphan, and stranger are the first in the kingdom, maybe then they will welcome those who were first, but are now last into true and eternal life. One thing is for sure for these Pharisees and the disciples: they will never be able to be a servant of both God and their wealth so they must decide, as the dishonest servant did, between God's covenant embodied in the servant's neighbors, the borrowers in the story and his wealth accrued at the cost of both his neighbors and the master.

I'm asking you today what rings true about this story for you? Carry it with you as you leave this place today. Remember it and let it bother you, challenge you, pull you in. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what you might be needing to hear today. In what ways can we walk out of the doors of this building and be creative or clever or shrewd in sharing the good news of Jesus with our neighbors and friends.