

Luke 16 : 1-15

There are many things you could say about Jesus, about his life and ministry, but the one thing everyone agrees on is that he was an amazing storyteller. The stories Jesus told have survived through the centuries and helped millions of faithful people as we have wrestled with what it means to live into the kingdom of God. That is why this morning's Gospel reading is so perplexing. Because the story of the dishonest businessman may very well be the strangest story Jesus ever told!

Think about it! If we're reading this thing correctly, Jesus is telling us to imitate a crook! How could that possibly be? What are we missing? How did the people Jesus was speaking to hear this story, and receive it with some sense of religious authority? Well, let's retell this story a bit so we can take a look at it another way.

Say there's this very rich businessman. Let's call him, oh, I don't know, how about Mr. Jobs. Okay? Mr. Jobs, through the business he has built, has tremendous influence on the regional economy and on the people who live in that region. Lots of people work for him. And the ones who don't work for him either rent property he owns or do business with people he employs. Mr. Jobs has a pretty big operation to run, so he brings in Mr. Gates to help run the business. Things go well for a while. Mr. Jobs gradually gives Mr. Gates full responsibility for the operation. It allows Mr. Jobs some time to get away and visit the health spas in the wine country near where he lives.

But Mr. Jobs is no fool. And he still reads the annual reports. And he smells a rat. So he does a little investigation. And Mr. Gates' fingerprints are all over some pretty ugly business dealings. Stealing secrets. Copying products and selling them to other vendors. Maybe even some underhanded financial transactions. Time for the boss to take control again. So Mr. Jobs calls Mr. Gates in, shows him the evidence of his misdoings, and tells him to pack his things. Mr. Gates knows he's been caught. He doesn't protest. He just hangs his head, and turns away. And here the story gets interesting.

Mr. Jobs could put Mr. Gates in jail! But he doesn't! And he could trumpet Mr. Gates' indiscretions far and wide, making sure Mr. Gates would never work in the neighborhood again. But he doesn't do that either! In fact, Mr. Jobs seems to be a rather caring gentleman. He keeps the matter quiet, so that Mr. Gates can bow out gracefully. Mr. Gates is no longer managing the estate. But only Mr. Jobs and Mr. Gates know that yet. And that gives Mr. Gates time to play his final hand of cards.

Instead of packing, Mr. Gates runs quickly to some of Mr. Jobs' debtors who live close by. They've always done business with Mr. Gates, and they have no idea that he's been canned. When he comes to their houses, they assume he's still in charge of Mr. Jobs' estate. Quick! he says. Where's your I.O.U. with the boss? Let me tear it up! Let's rewrite this thing for half the amount. So they do it.

Now, you've got to understand something: the fact that these people so easily allowed Mr. Gates to change the bills means two things: first, they sincerely believed that he was still the manager, and that he had the authority to act as an agent for Mr. Jobs. Second, they also were very sure that Mr. Jobs had approved of these transactions. If they thought Mr. Gates was doing this thing on his own and Mr. Jobs found out about their collaborations, they would be in big trouble!

It all happens very quickly. The contract for 800 iPods is cut in half; the bill for a thousand iPhones is reduced by two hundred. You get the idea that Mr. Gates was acting in haste, don't you? He had no time to figure percentages, or calculate market trends. He just lopped off a significant value from each settlement package. And the deed is done.

Now, says Jesus, it doesn't take long for Mr. Jobs to find out what's happened. And the word on the street is that he's become quite a hero. In fact, those who've just had their debts reduced come looking for Mr. Jobs to thank him. So there they are, mobbing his mansion, and shouting his praise! What a generous man he is! So what does he do? What can he do? Actually, he has two alternatives: either he can tell the tale of Mr. Gates' scheme, and revoke the cuts he made on their bills; or he can keep quiet about the whole thing, and let things stand as they are. If he does the first, he stands to lose face. None of the debtors would have grumbled about the bills before. But now, they've seen a moment of grace.

And even though they weren't expecting it, they've begun to live out of its freedoms and its promises. If Mr. Jobs takes away the blessings they've just received, he'll look stingy and greedy. It'll seem like he cares more for his wealth than he does for his people. Besides that, Mr. Gates will come out smelling like a rose! After all, he wasn't cheating himself! He was only looking out for the welfare of the debtors! So he'll have a welcome in every home! Which is just what he wanted in the first place!

However, if Mr. Jobs decides to keep the matter quiet, a whole different scenario will unfold. The people of the community will praise him for his generosity, and his esteem will increase enormously. And that's the picture Jesus leaves us with. Mr. Jobs stands at the door of his home, surrounded by the praise of the community. At his side is Mr. Gates, grinning at the success of his scheme. And Mr. Jobs slaps him on the shoulder, laughing at the good joke that's been played. Mr. Gates gained lots of friends. Mr. Jobs rose in the esteem of the community. Everyone feels good and the whole town celebrates!

Now, how is Jesus going to give a moral to this story? What does he want to say to his disciples? Well, obviously he's not telling people to be dishonest. Rather, I think he's probably got some attitude in mind which he wants people to copy. And if there's one thing that holds the story together, if there's one idea around which everything revolves, if there's one quality of character on which all the details hinge, IT HAS TO BE THE GENEROSITY OF MR. JOBS.

Think of it! It was the generosity of Mr. Jobs that made it possible for Gates to do what he did! The generosity of Mr. Jobs gave Gates time to put his affairs in order, rather than sending him right off to prison in public disgrace! The generosity of Mr. Jobs was the key to the scheme: the debtors heard Gates change the terms of the bills in their favor, and they said to themselves, "Yeah! Isn't that just like Mr. Jobs! He's a generous man, all right. He's so magnanimous!" And when the crowds gather at the mansion house, as Jesus concludes his story, the cry of delight celebrates the Master's great generosity. So the main point of the parable is not about being dishonest in order to make a buck, or to secure something for ourselves. Instead, the main point is this:

DO YOU KNOW THE GREAT GENEROSITY OF GOD, AND ARE YOU MAKING FULL USE OF IT?

DO YOU RECOGNIZE ALL THE BLESSINGS IN YOUR LIFE AND IN THIS WORLD AND DO YOU MAKE THE MOST OF THEM TO CELEBRATE THE GOODNESS OF GOD?

The master commends the steward for making fine use of his generosity, not to line his own pockets, but to spread the blessings of the master throughout the community!

And in the same way, Jesus expects his followers to learn the great generosity of GOD, and to make use of it in spreading God's blessings throughout the world. As the manager knew that the most admirable character of his master was his generosity, so we should learn that about God in heaven.

That steward knew that using the generosity of his master was the only way he could survive the pressures of the times in which he lived. So too we, the "people of the light," ought to be wise enough to know that if we hope to survive the pressures of the times in which we live, our only hope is found in the generosity of God and in modeling our lives after that generosity.

In the words of the old hymn:

"He giveth more grace when the burden grows greater.

He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.

To added affliction He addeth His mercy;

To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

His love has no limit, His grace has no measure,

His pow'r has no boundaries known unto men;

For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,

He giveth and giveth and giveth again."

Only those who discover God's great generosity become generous people themselves. The character of our spirituality is not seen and known primarily by how many times we go to church, or by the songs we sing, or by the prayers we pray, or by the confessions we make. Rather, THE CHARACTER OF OUR SPIRITUALITY IS FELT IN THE LEVEL OF OUR GENEROSITY TOWARD THOSE AROUND US. Around the number of times we are willing to forgive. The number of times we are willing to share out of our abundance. The degree to which we are willing to give of our time and ourselves to make the lives of others richer and more fulfilling.

How willing are you to forgive when your friends make a mistake – or even do something intentionally knowing it will hurt you, but do it because they have to for some reason?

How generous are you with the gifts in your life. With the time you spend with relatives or friends or members of our wider community who need help or just need someone to talk to?

If we were all as generous toward others as God has been generous with us, we'd probably give everything away. But of course that is not realistic. But we can, in a sense, give it all away if we remind ourselves that everything in our lives is a gift from God.

Holding on to things and telling ourselves that they belong to us or that we “earned” them is not generosity of spirit. It is making an idol of our accomplishments.

One person put it this way: if you want to know the quality of a person's heart, check it by the sincerity of their outstretched hand! If generosity doesn't characterize the way you live your life, then your heart's not beating in time with God. Because learning from that generous nature of God, we are all called to enlighten other people's lives with our own generosity of spirit.

Let us pray

Gracious and loving God, fill our hearts with gratefulness that we are so filled with your love that we daily reach out to others in your name. May the generosity of spirit exemplified in the lives of each person here today help to bring more people to know and give thanks for the blessings in their lives. And in so doing may we continue to draw all the world to you. That your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.