

Powerful and Powerless

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Luke 16:1-13

“And his master commended the dishonest steward because he had acted shrewdly....”

Imagine being introduced to someone for the first time and your host saying, “I would like you to meet my Philandering Minister” or “I have been eager to introduce you to our Lazy Vice President” or “Join me in welcoming your Duplicitous Senator.” Then, from that first meeting on, somehow everything you hear or observe about this person seems to confirm what your friend first told you about her. Before us is a parable that has been known as the Parable of the Dishonest Steward. You have just been set up by Luke to see the worst in someone.

Listen first to Jesus’ parable with its title in mind: There was a rich man who had a manager, a steward, a person under his employ who was in charge of overseeing his property. Charges were brought to the rich man that the steward was squandering his property. Charges that we assume are true because we have been told that he is dishonest. Had we instead been told that this was a parable about two men or a parable about an owner and a trustworthy manager, we might find ourselves wondering about the reliability of the charges. Instead, either in italics above the story or in the footnotes below, we read *Parable of the Dishonest Steward*. The honest owner is being taken by the dishonest manager, we think. This guy is a scoundrel, justifying the owner’s cry, “You are fired!”

The parable continues and, uncharacteristically, gives us the inner thoughts of the steward. “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me?” We listen to his plan and presume it is a scheme to save his crooked neck, reducing the debt owed the owner by the workers and thereby securing their grateful hospitality should he really be thrown out by the owner. Speaking for myself, it had never occurred to me to think otherwise of the steward.

What if, instead, we took off the lens of honest *or* dishonest and put on the lens of powerful *and* powerless. How might we see these characters and, through them, see ourselves? If you bother to learn a little about first century agrarian society in Israel, you discover that the steward belongs to the class of managers who execute the will of the often absent property owners. “In this case,” according to New Testament scholar William Herzog, “the steward is highly placed in the household bureaucracy.” This is both good news and bad news because the steward must manage the owner’s estate in such a way that he realizes “a profit large enough to support the owner’s lifestyle and provide resources needed to fuel his endless political struggle with other elites. The steward therefore occupies a powerful but vulnerable position.”

He is powerful and yet powerless at the same time because he also is “constantly susceptible to backstabbing...from disgruntled debtors and tenants.” The verb used [used in the parable] means “‘to bring charges with hostile intent’ and can imply ‘either falsely or slanderously.’ The steward is always caught in the cross fire between the master’s greed and excessive demands, on the one hand, and the tenants’ or debtors’ endless complaints, on the other.” He is viewed suspiciously by the master and enviously by the debtors.

Likewise, the debtors or tenants are both powerful and powerless. The steward charges them excessive interest, a practice against Torah, hiding the principle and interest in one payment known as their debt. It is the way the system works. Everyone knows this, from top to bottom. Again, the steward must turn a profit for the owner as well as make a living for himself. Still, in the parable, the debtors exercise what little power they have over the steward by casting doubt on his honesty. Granted, their power is minimal, but exercising it gains them a reduction in their debt! Not knowing that the steward has been fired because of their charges, they readily make a deal with him and rejoice at their good fortune when the day is done.

Finally, the rich man is both powerful and powerless. He is oddly at the mercy of a system working in his favor, allowing him to keep face in a culture of shame and honor. When the steward presents the owner with the renegotiated loans, backed by the debtors who are now celebrating the generosity of their master and patron, he realizes that he has been painted into a corner. He could fire the whole lot of them, but then where would he be? Instead, as the parable puts it in case we have taken off our binary lenses, “he commends the dishonest steward because he had acted shrewdly.”

What has any of this to do with our lives? I am thinking presently of the 5300 Wells Fargo employees who have been fired for setting up over two million fake bank accounts and credit cards to meet what were otherwise unreachable sales goals. The news stories read just like the parable. “I got threatened to be fired as a teller with them,” said one former Wells teller, “because I wasn’t meeting my numbers.” Another said he was always getting written up for failing to bump his “solutions” numbers up. A Wells Fargo chief executive says he feels accountable for what has happened, but he blames workers for “misinterpreting” the sales goals. According to a customer, the chief executives are denying knowledge of the system because they do not want to affect their million-dollar houses and jobs. But, the

customer says, “When 5300 plus employees lose their jobs, it’s not just them—they’re scapegoats.” Four days after a settlement last Thursday, Wells announced that it would halt sales goals altogether—beginning January 1. “We don’t want there to be any doubt on the part of our customers,” the executive said, “that our team members have their best interests at heart.” Still, the bank is waiting a few months to implement the change because it needs enough “lead time” to roll out the change correctly, she explained.

Clearly there are distinctions to be made, not only between the honest and dishonest dealings we have with one another but also between who is the real dishonest character and who is the scapegoat. Yet because the bottom line for Jesus is the admonition to be shrewd, mindful of the eternal consequences of how you play the system, I think Jesus is taking the complexity of our lives more seriously than we do! Like every character in the parable, we experience ourselves as both powerful and powerless. The vast majority of us in this sanctuary are or have been in middle management: teachers who answer to principals as well as parents while daily trying to do right by students; money managers needing to turn a profit for the company while making money for a client; sale reps who report to the head office while nurturing relationships with customers; ministers who answer to congregations and are accountable to God. For the most part, we are participants in systems that we did not create and have very little say over reordering. When I think of our common life as a nation right now, the experience of powerlessness and the promise of being given power over our daily lot has everything to do with the candidate for whom many will vote.

On a very mundane level, what I learn from the steward in this parable is that I am responsible for using the power I am given between birth and death, limited and tainted though it may be, with eternity in mind. Granting that his motives were mixed as all our motives are, the effect of his power over the debtors was to cancel their debt: a kingdom gesture, to be sure, that was probably an unintended consequence. As Herzog says, “The result was a glimpse for the debtors of another order, one in which forgiveness of debt would be more than a petition in a prayer.”

Back to us here and now. How do you scheme as teachers—and I know that you do—to use the system or circumvent it so that your students are given a glimpse of a future in which they will be free to think and dream and create? How do you scheme as sales representatives in the midst of pursuing a bottom line? No doubt you build lasting relationships with customers so they buy more; and yet it is the relationship that gives meaning to your life and creates a bond of trust over the years, a bond that turns out to be a glimpse of eternity in time. How do we as citizens exercise our little power within a corrupt social and political system as those who have eternity in mind?

Our teacher in these things is the one telling the parable, the one on the way to the cross where his death and resurrection will reveal the weakness of power and the power of weakness. Because God was about to use the death-dealing power of Roman crucifixion to defeat death once for all, Jesus tells us a parable about a steward working a corrupt system who inadvertently acts as an agent of God’s debt-cancelling love. Jesus tells this strange parable to give us eyes to see what God is doing here and now to make human life human.

On Friday I read a most incredible article about Mierle Laderman Ukeles whose exhibit of “Maintenance Art” opens at The Queens Museum today. Ukeles has been the unsalaried artist-in-residence with New York’s Department of Sanitation for four decades. Rejected by her mentors at Pratt Institute in the 1960’s because her art was too messy, too sexual, she struck out on her own, married, had a child and basically became, in her own words, a successful domestic worker and a failed artist. She was powerless yet chose to use what power she had with eternity in mind. In a letter-of-intent-to-self titled “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!” she wrote, “I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately), I ‘do’ art.”

“‘Up to now separately’ was the pivotal phrase. From that time forward, she would continue her everyday life but...redefine it as art.” She began with at home performances: “dress the kids, sort the socks (she arranged black ones into calligraphic characters); photograph everything....” Soon she went public, calling the tasks of maintenance workers and security guards and sanitation workers art, flipping “conventional hierarchies of value upside down, turning art into a kind of chore, and chores into a kind of ceremony.”

The last paragraph of the article returns us to the lesson of the parable: using the power we have with eternity in mind. “Care, repair, preservation are what Ms. Ukeles’s art has been about right along,” Holland Carter concludes. “*It’s as if her early realization that self-empowerment comes not through fighting but through redefining the meaning of power had given her a usable awareness of vulnerability in the world.* That awareness has taken her, in ways extremely rare in contemporary art, through potential barriers of class and gender; it has given her an enviable ease with Spirituality (her Jewish faith is central to her life); and it has let her produce work that’s as companionable as a shared meal and as serious as art can be.”

And the powerful master commended the powerless steward because he had acted shrewdly, with eternity in mind. Go and act likewise. Thanks be to God!