

September 18, 2016
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 20, Year C, RCL
The Rev. Dr. Lynda Tyson
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Psalm 79:1-9
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

"I want to walk as a child of the light. I want to follow Jesus." Those words of the hymn we just sang may flow easily out of our mouths in here, and may be much more difficult to live out there. Yesterday, I counted—Jesus says the words "follow me" twenty-one times in the four Gospels.

The late Dr. Verna Dozier had a thing or two to say about following Jesus. Verna Dozier was a public school teacher and administrator who became an inspiring theologian and lay preacher in the Episcopal Church. By the time she died ten years ago this month at the age of eighty-eight Verna Dozier had become a prolific writer and one of the most high-profile African-American women of her day. Some called her a prophet, the likes of Jeremiah. It is fair to say Verna Dozier had some issues with the church, though she loved the church even while she spoke words of judgment against the institution.

In her book, *The Dream of God*, Verna Dozier says, "The church missed its high calling to be the new thing in the world when [the church] decided to worship Jesus instead of following him." Dozier makes a distinction between the earthly Jesus and the Risen Christ when she says The Risen Christ is to be worshiped, and Jesus of Nazareth is to be followed. Dozier reminds us, "Jesus did not come to bring a new religion...Jesus came as the Way, a new possibility for encountering God ever anew in the...changing experience of life...In Jesus, God has come and offered us another way to live...Jesus of Nazareth is to be followed."¹

Followers of Jesus are said to be children of the light. In John's Gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, "...believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." (Jn. 12.36) In today's Gospel lesson from Luke we get a confusing message that sounds somewhat critical of the children of the light.

Every interpretation I have read of this passage from Luke 16 calls it "the most puzzling" of all of Jesus' parables. Frederick Borsch, our retired Bishop of Los Angeles, freely admits this passage "is regularly avoided by preachers...[and is] on the banned list of Sunday-school texts." Bishop Borsch notes the manager's behavior in the story appears to be "shady at best." And he wonders if the Bible may even be suggesting here we are "to congratulate a Pentagon worker for illegally saving defense contractors money so he can later get a good job with one of them?"ⁱⁱ

At the end of the parable, Jesus says to the disciples, "...the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." The King James translation says it a little differently, "...the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." The non-followers of Jesus, wiser? More shrewd? More clever? More on-the-ball? Well, this sounds like stereotyping, but I suppose it was and is, today, a popular expectation for a devout person of faith, a child of the light, to be a less aggressive, less "shrewd" business manager than a more materialistically-driven entrepreneur. So, is Jesus offering a criticism or a tongue-in-the-cheek compliment?

This parable is described as "baffling," "bewildering," "difficult," "frustrating," "unsatisfying," "shocking." There are as many interpretations of this parable as there are adjectives, including one I read that asks the question, "Why would Jesus make an example for Godly living so unsavory?"ⁱⁱⁱ How is it, Jesus is not critical of the employer in the story, or the one the employer commends, the so-called "dishonest manager?" Other translations call him an "unjust" or "unrighteous steward." Bishop Borsch has coined my favorite title, "The Parable of the Resilient Rascal."^{iv}

Last week, I discovered an essay entitled, "An Understanding of the Parable of the Shrewd Manager" written by Nigerian Professor, Olubiyi Adeniyi Adewale of the Christian Theology Unit, at Nigeria's National Open University. Dr. Adewale says failure to understand "...the culture and practices of 1st century Palestine would lead to the kind of misunderstanding that has pervaded the various attempts to interpret this parable."^v In other words, we make a mistake if we try to impose our own contemporary Western norms and ethics upon the Parable of the Shrewd Manager (or the Resilient Rascal).

Adewale begins by taking a look at the character of the characters. What kind of person is the rich man, [the employer]?" The text says charges were brought against the steward. "What attempt did [the employer] make to investigate the allegations...?" Is it just for the employer to fire the steward on the word of another? The Greek word translated here as "charge" can alternatively be translated as "malign," "slander," or "defame." What if the charges stem from the accuser's malice and simply are not true? The employer's only question to his

employee, “What is this that I *hear* about you?,” reveals the importance the master places in others’ perceptions of his employee, which, Adewale says, would be consistent with the then popular belief that an employee’s perceived failures (whether true or not)—an employee’s perceived failures bring dishonor upon the employer. Someone else’s perception is what motivates the employer to dismiss the steward, as a means to save his own reputation. The employer does not dare have someone working for him whose performance may be subject to question, by anyone.

In his essay, Adewale explains a practice of voluntary debt reduction not uncommon in 1st century Palestine and elsewhere, also called “voluntary rent remission,” wherein a landlord would grant rent or debt reductions to persons working his land in what was potentially a “win-win.” If the workers were in deep arrears and could not (possibly ever) pay all they owed, reducing their debts and collecting at least partial payment maintained the landowner’s income stream. Public honor was preserved for all parties concerned; as opposed to the shame that would have befallen them all if the workers defaulted on their debts (which actually would have been a crime, further tarnishing the reputations of both the workers and their employer). And the voluntary debt forgiveness increased the workers’ loyalty, even their dependence upon the landowner. (Side Note—For believers in democracy, there may be a slippery-slope here: the workers’ potential obligation to the land owner as a result of debt reduction possibly leading to lifelong indentured servitude. But let’s leave that for a social-justice sermon another day.)

What about the character of the manager in the story? Well, his future has limitations: finding some way to keep his job, finding another similar job (since this kind of work is apparently all he can do), or finding hospitality from his employer’s debtors, which he says to himself is his plan. But, realistically, that would only be a temporary fix—they wouldn’t likely put him up for the rest of his life. Adewale determines that having “any hope of future employment as a manager [requires] the steward...to salvage his reputation as a good, loyal steward, and the only way he can do this is [by taking] good care of his master, [restoring] his master’s honor, [the honor tainted by an outsider’s charges that the steward had been squandering his master’s property].” And the steward’s debt forgiveness plan would do just that.

Adewale writes, “It was the plausibility of the scheme that actually led the master to praise the steward. [Far from cheating his employer,] in using the scheme, he...brought profit to the master, restored the master’s honor and went further to present [the master] as magnanimous to the society. This scheme would [also make the steward] appealing to other landlords in case his master failed to reappoint him and [would have] made the [master’s debtors] hospitable to him [later, should] he get [work elsewhere]. This ingenuity was [appreciated] by the master [in the story] and also by Jesus...”, if we understand Jesus, as the storyteller, to have said, “...the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” It is as if Jesus, with a twinkle in his eye, is saying to the disciples, “You, my friends, would not have thought of such a debt forgiveness plan.” Jesus ends the story here, but it sounds like the manager has redeemed himself, and the master brings him back to work.

Finally, it has been said that allegory cannot be used to interpret this parable; but, I am going to take that as a dare. What if we imagine the master (the employer) in the story as God, the manager as Jesus, and the debtors as Jesus’ followers—the not-terribly-shrewd children of light? The manager in the story seeks out the debtors, just as (in life) the followers, the disciples, the children of light have been sought out by Jesus. Like the debtors in the story, all followers have plenty to be forgiven by God—sins, or debts that can never be repaid fully, even in an entire lifetime. Jesus, whose life (not whose job, but whose life) very soon after telling this story will be on the line—Jesus will, by his death, secure God’s forgiveness of the followers’ debts, their sins (and ours), through a most startling and extravagant plan of redemption that will keep the followers in the fold forever, and increase their loyalty to (our loyalty to), their dependence upon (our dependence upon) the Risen Christ who, like God, is to be worshiped, as Jesus of Nazareth is to be followed.

NOTES

ⁱ Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God, A Call to Return*, (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), 97ff.

ⁱⁱ Frederick H. Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), 92-97.

^{iv} Borsch, 17.

^v *This single endnote will suffice to credit all references in this sermon to:* Olubiyi Adeniyi Adewale, “An Understanding of the Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-13),” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 16, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 2013): 1-25, accessed September 14, 2016, <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol16-issue6/T0166125130.pdf?id=8297>.