

Money Isn't Everything

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2010 at St. John's Church, Olney, MD. Readings: Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; and Luke 16:1-13.

O God, may only your truth be spoken here and only your truth be heard. AMEN.

When I was a child, one of the volumes from which we read at bedtime was the classic **Hurlbut's Story of the Bible**. It was a sizeable volume that covered a wide sweep of salvation history in 168 chapters, and we read it chapter by chapter each night. My brothers would pile up on my double bed, and one of our parents would read. As I recall, most chapters concluded with a line that said, "The moral of the story is..." As I recall, my mother didn't always agree with Hurlbut about that moral, but then it was written in another era.

In any case, in today's parable we might say, "The moral of the story is money isn't everything."

In summary, a landowner discovers that the man who oversees the production of his estate has been defrauding him and he fires him. The steward, concerned about his future employment and reputation, contacts the landowner's debtors, before they can learn what has happened, and reduces the amount they owe in order to ingratiate himself with them. When the landowner learns what the steward's done, he commends him for being shrewd. This seems very strange to us. Why would you commend someone for defrauding you? Worse yet, it appears he has defrauded him twice – first by the actions that got him dismissed, and then a second time by reducing the debts owed before the word got out. In our 21st century western world, fraud is fraud. What's commendable about that?

However, one of the challenges of scripture is that not only does it have to be translated from one language to another, but it has also to be translated across more than 2000 years of history, and across widely differing cultures. For help I turned to John Pilch, a biblical scholar at Georgetown who writes on ancient Mediterranean culture.

According to Pilch, the chief issues in the agrarian economy of the times are who controls the land, who controls the produce, and who controls the surplus. The estate steward in the parable oversees the produce of the land. The land is rented to tenants. Some pay a percentage of the crop, some pay in currency, and some pay a fixed amount of the produce. In this parable it appears the tenants pay a fixed amount of produce. A rough modern equivalent would be 900 gallons of olive oil and 150 bushels of wheat.

Now the steward was entitled to a commission on each transaction, and had a public contract spelling out the duties of the parties and the financial arrangements, commission,

principal, interest and so forth. The contract also provides that the steward must pay for any losses incurred by the landowner. If he is a cheat then our steward is very fortunate because when he defrauds the landowner he is not fined or imprisoned. He is simply fired – an act of mercy and generosity on the part of the landowner.

It is also quite possible however that the steward, as a shrewd businessman, was willing to sacrifice his commissions, his short-term earnings for long-term security. It may be that when the steward calls the debtors to settle their accounts, he simply eliminates his own commission, knowing that he will benefit in the long term from having a place to stay once he is out of work.

In either case, there is a real dilemma for the landowner, and a modern example may bring some clarity. This week heralded the start of the Oprah Show's final year. Among the more spectacular of her shows was one from several years ago in which Oprah hand-picked the studio audience, and through the generosity of General Motors every member of the studio audience was provided with a brand new Pontiac – at a cost of \$7 million dollars no less.

Now, \$7 million dollars is no small sum, even for General Motors. However, we can also suppose that the donation was worth far more than that to GM in terms of the public relations and media attention they received. In addition to getting their name and generosity in front of a huge television audience, they also gained great news coverage for their product. Who isn't going to love a company who provides cars for people in real need? And who isn't going to love the Oprah Show that made it all happen and enjoyed the same benefits in terms of public relations and media attention?

With that in mind, let's return to the landowner. He has been deceived by his steward and he will lose esteem in the eyes of all those doing business with him. This could be very bad press. He could cancel the fraudulent contracts. After all, they were illegal and he is owed the sum originally agreed to. But if he does that, he will alienate the tenants and the entire village, which is now, as we speak, celebrating the landowner's mercy and generosity! This is not a good public relations strategy! On the other hand, if he allows the fraudulent contracts to stand, he will be short of produce, but his honor will be noted far and wide, as will that of the estate steward of course. This would be very good press! In a culture in which honor is everything, people far and wide are now celebrating the noble and generous landowner! He is enjoying the benefit of a great public relations strategy and garnering more than his share of media attention.

Like General Motors, the landowner has gained more in this transaction than the cost of the produce he will have lost. Like the Oprah Show, the shrewd steward has brokered an arrangement that has also enhanced his own reputation, even though it may have cost him his commissions.

Earlier I mentioned that the issues in the agrarian economy of the times are who controls the land, who controls the produce, and who controls the surplus. What the steward did it appears he did at the expense of the surplus. He did not gain his commission whether or not the landowner received reduced rents.

So the landowner commends the steward for acting shrewdly, because he knows that there are times in which it is beneficial to resist the lure of a quick buck and make a long-term investment. On top of this, the landowner knows that he may not have lost anything himself — he'll still receive the olive oil and wheat that the debtors owe him. What does he care if his former employee takes his commissions with him or not? In the Mediterranean world this was a win-win transaction. For the landowner, the value of his restored honor and his relationship with the community is priceless. For him there was far more at stake than a profit margin. And the honor and esteem of the landowner has been not only restored but enhanced, while the unemployed steward can now claim favors from those who benefited from the deals he secured for them.

This is a tale that ends “happily ever after.” The landowner applauded the shrewd steward, because everyone benefited from the exchange. In the Mediterranean world, the moral of the story is that money isn't everything.

According to Jesus: “No slave can serve two masters.” You cannot maintain a dual focus on short-term profits and long-term security. You have to pick one or the other. As is true in the story of the shrewd steward, there are times in which we have to sacrifice the commissions of this world to enjoy the life of the world to come. Laying out our choice in a crystal-clear contrast, Jesus concludes today's passage by saying, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (v. 13).

The passage is a call for us to practice Christian stewardship, and to make sacrificial gifts in support of God's work in the world. When we do this, we are following the example of the steward in the parable, a person who shrewdly trades short-term profits for long-term security.

In his book the Autobiography of God, Lloyd Ogilvie, chaplain of the U.S. Senate writes:

I had a good visit with one of America's most successful businessmen on a cross-country flight recently. He had risen from a very humble background to immense wealth. I asked him the secret of his success. His response was very interesting.

"Shrewdness!" was his one-word reply.

I was shocked by his frankness.

He went on to say that he spent every waking hour thinking, scheming, planning,

developing and putting deals together. In it all he had tried to be completely honest in all his affairs!

I couldn't help but admire his single-mindedness. He knew what he wanted and left nothing to chance. He worked hard to achieve his goals. All the power of his intellect, the strength of his seemingly limitless energies, the determination of his iron will and the resources of his calculated discernment of people were employed to accomplish his goals.

Later, Ogilvie mused what could happen if the people of God put the same sort of "shrewdness" to work for the kingdom of God.

--Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Autobiography of God* (Glendale, Calif.: GL Regal Books, 1979), 199.

So, the moral of the story is that money isn't everything. Or, as Alexandre Dumas put it, money "is a good servant but a bad master." (Alexandre Dumas fils, *Camille*, 1852). We are called to the shrewd practice of Christian stewardship and to sacrifice the commissions of this world for the blessings of the world to come.