

Can we risk everything?

In today's gospel, Luke 16, it's as if the early Christian community is gasping and saying, "Did Jesus really say that? Did he really tell that story? What in heaven's name was Jesus thinking? Why does a guy presented as a crook seem to get praised for further dishonesty by someone who's just fired him? Just exactly what about this fellow's behavior does Jesus want us to emulate?"

When confronted with this undeniable recall of what the Lord said, the community was embarrassed and tried to explain what Jesus might have meant. That's why there are a series of "explanations" attached to the story. So we have:

- a) Make friends for yourselves through your use of this world's goods, so that when they fail you, a lasting reception will be yours.
- b) If you can trust the man in little things, you can trust him in greater.
- c) If you cannot be trusted with illusive wealth, who will trust you with lasting?
- d) You cannot give yourself to God and cash.

These explanations are "spin offs" from the parable, but all of them are designed to lead the

listener away from the embarrassing story by explaining what they think Jesus really meant.

So what did Jesus really mean? ...A couple of things, I think. First, we are called to imitate the crook's energy, not his dishonesty. It's as if Jesus said, "Look, this man faced the situation and did something about it, you followers of mine should be as industrious in things that really count."

But there is a deeper, a second level of meaning in this story and it has to do with reliance upon oneself and surrendering that reliance to reliance upon God. This is an especially important lesson in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks last week.

Jesus and the community of St. Luke who interpreted his teachings saw all around them plenty of people going about their worldly business, ignoring the urgent call to change their ways. Like Jesus and St. Luke, we live in a culture that does not put God first, and each of us knows how hard it is to stay God centered. In today's parable, Jesus uses a worldly, a non-religious example but acknowledges his audience's secular orientation.

In the story, the danger is obvious, and the human response for self-preservation seems very natural. The need for repentance, Jesus says, is as clear as is the dishonest manager's urgent need to survive unemployment. If only sinners hustled as hard as this

guy does, God's welcome of them in heaven would be as likely as the manager's welcome at the homes of his grateful debtors.

The life of the dishonest manager has a clear "before" and "after". What does he leave behind? He's just as much out of a job even with his master's praise. When we meet him, he has been squandering another man's resources. His rewards have been focused exclusively on the present: the security of plenty of money and a good job. He has wielded significant reflected power as he represents his powerful master's financial interests in the marketplace. Before his fall, he is the sort of businessman many of us secretly admire, a kind of Ivan Bosky: at the top of the heap, maybe a little bit crooked, but a tough guy, a success, someone to emulate.

And what does he choose – this out of job guy – knocked off his pins by his firing? He gives up all hope of security by association with power or carefully amassed resources. Instead, he relinquishes resources, in essence canceling debts giving alms – acting even more corrupt. Hands empty and expecting to be cast out, he lives in hope, based on relationships he has founded in mercy and trusts will bear fruit in the future. This is Jesus' idea of "shrewd," the behavior of a man who has let go of money and put his trust in God. Isn't this what God's Spirit is calling us to do in the face of falling stocks and falling buildings – to let go of things and put trust in God?

Sooner or later – sooner, if we are paying attention – if we are paying attention – we will stand before God like the dishonest manager, like a deer in the headlights, like a rat in a trap knowing the game is up. The incidents and behaviors change, and our

ability to see ourselves clearly varies enormously. But if we can admit today that we are not strong enough to dig and ashamed to beg, we are shown how to snap out of it. By opening our hands instead of clenching them in defense, we can let go of self-reliance and give God a chance to save us. Let us pray. Oh God, you know how hard it is for us to trust and to risk, so afraid are we of failure and of poverty for ourselves and for those we love. Grant us your courage so we can follow your way revealed in Jesus Christ who had no one but you upon whom to rely. We ask this through that same Christ our Lord.

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