

Sermon 09-19-10—"A Strange Parable"

Well, what did you think about the gospel passage you just heard? Did it puzzle you? It should have!

As I've told many of you informally, I really enjoy preaching. Selfishly, preaching has been for me a lifetime post-graduate course that is still a pleasure and fascination. So this summer as we began to prepare our new fall plans, I asked Cindy more than once for my schedule of preaching assignments. But when I got the spread sheet of events including my preaching assignments for this fall I began to have second thoughts! As I'm getting ready to preach the good news of the gospel -- this parable of the dishonest steward was the one for me this Sunday! It immediately reminded me of that old adage I spoke about this summer "No good deed goes unpunished."

If this gospel today leaves you loaded with questions, you have very good company with bible scholars down through the ages. Some parables give you models to follow, like the Good Samaritan. Not this one. There's no one in today's story about whom I'd say to my kids, "grow up to be like this person." The best we can say is that it's a parable meant to wake us up and makes us think about how we make our way through life, and what we do with what we're given.

So, even though I can't capture all of the tongue-in-cheek barbs in the story, here's my paraphrase of what you've just heard: A lousy manager is about to be fired. He hustles around and, on his own initiative reduces other people's debts to get some cash in hand. He thinks he'll make friends that way to take care of him in the days ahead. And in a no-

win situation he manages through his shrewdness to discover a way forward.

Jesus is beginning this parable with a familiar introduction “there was a rich man” and then the ax falls—as the rich man fires his manager. Then listen as the manager talks to himself: “What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg?” Then the a-ha! answer comes to him, “well I have decided what I will do”—

What he decides to do is not at all commendable, perhaps not even comprehensible. But his boss commends him anyway!

So then Jesus enters into the action and suggests that if shady characters like this manager, caught between the rock and the hard place, can figure out how to take the slippery and expedient way to move forward, people of real faith can learn from that example and move forward too.

In its puzzling way the parable challenges people of faith to put as much energy and ingenuity and shrewdness into their vocations as those who are just out for a buck. Surprising as it may seem, maybe this really is a good parable for us here today. What would this church look like if all the energy, and ingenuity and the shrewdness of the manager trying to get out of a jam, was reshaped and directed toward the church? What would it look like?

Well, here at St. James’ everything we do this fall is all about moving forward. You’ve heard it already this summer, that beginning last Sunday our plan is for a worship schedule of three morning services and a program that will give shape to

our three commitments of worship, Christian learning and formation for ALL ages, and service for others. And then as all this radiates into our personal and institutional lives, we will really mean what we say when we answer the call of St. James' next month with our pledges to the church and repeat the theme over and over again to be "Joyfully Thanking Our Generous God."

Yes, here at St. James' it's all about moving forward. As Adam might well have said to Eve, "Remember my dear, we're in an age of transition."

This can really be an age of transition this fall for us as new and exciting challenges and opportunities make this a time here for "Building Connections." In all that's happening around here I sense that there's a "humming" and a "buzzing" as this congregation turns to a new chapter in its life. And what that humming and buzzing about is that, as someone expressed it, "it is time to paint a new picture."

Moving forward into the unknown is not easy but that's what scripture is all about: Abraham moving to a land promised by God, not knowing where he was going; the children of Israel in Exodus, moving toward the land of milk and honey, led by Moses who, if you remember your scripture, was once a basket case! It's about disciples accompanying Jesus toward Jerusalem who needed to be told to stay awake, to keep their eyes open.

Yes, we too are called into this serial story of God's action in history. Keep your eyes! Don't assume you know all you need to know. Be ready to learn in surprising ways. In this puzzling story we read and heard this morning Jesus tells his disciples they would do well to see how secular, even

unscrupulous people figure out how to maneuver through life's challenges.

Think about it. These folks don't stop by saying those deadly Seven Last Words "WE'VE NEVER DONE IT THAT WAY BEFORE" I suppose you've heard how many Episcopalians it takes to change a light bulb, haven't you? The answer: A whole congregation—one to screw in the light bulb, the rest of the church to talk about how much they liked the old one!

No, there's no stopping place like that for Jesus. Instead, In this parable he doesn't just invite, he shakes us up, to get us ready to learn from unexpected places and to think outside the box. And yet, when all is said and done, we are to be faithful to the God who brought us to this place and time. Do you know why? Because, when push comes to shove, God wants your life, all of it, not just your lips and good words, but your talents and treasure. That may be hard but we always have to make choices, to choose THIS day, who you will serve...

So if I have anything to say, advise, encourage, and challenge you with from this strange parable, it is this: bring your energy, your "holy sanctified shrewdness" and your puzzlements, to offer in worship.

We bring all that to the altar, because in the end it comes down to gratitude—joyfully thanking our generous God. That's why we keep worship at the center, because it reminds us week after week to keep in proportion who we are, and who God is, as we receive a compass and strength to move forward. AMEN