

(Jeremiah 8:18-22 NRSV)

¹⁸ My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. ¹⁹ Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" ("Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?") ²⁰ "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." ²¹ For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. ²² Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

^{9:1} O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

(Luke 16:1-9 NRSV)

¹ Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man[ager] was squandering his property. ² So he summoned [the manager] and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.'

³ Then the manager said 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. ⁴ I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' ⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶ He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' ⁷ Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' ⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

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In Whom Do You Put Your Trust?

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Luke 16:1-9

Have you ever had the experience of reading something and then realizing that you have read it wrong? Rather than reading what was on the page, you read what you expected to be on the page? Or, have you ever read over and over something you have written, certain that it is fine, only to find out later that there were obvious mistakes that you didn't catch? It's why so very few people are good at being their own proofreaders. Very often most of us will read what we know it should say rather than what it does say.

I think the Bible presents similar problems. We have a pretty good idea what it should say, and that's often, therefore, what we are sure it does say. Even Biblical scholars and translators, paying close attention, fall prey to the problem.

Consider this example. In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 16, verse 7, the New Revised Standard version reads; "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was." The New Revised Standard Version was published in 1989. Until that time, until 1989, every modern English translation of the Bible rendered the verse, "Greet Andronicus and Junius," both men's names, rather than, "Greet Andronicus and Junia." Every modern English translation of the Bible before 1989 translated the name Junius, even though the venerable King James Version had it right. Every modern English translation of the Bible before 1989 translated the name Junius, even though it required a torturous, almost impossible rendering of the Greek grammar. And here's the icing on the cake. Every modern English translation of the Bible before 1989 translated the name Junius, even though nowhere, not even one time in all of Greek literature or anywhere else in the Graeco/Roman world does the man's name Junius appear. The name Junius simply does not exist. On the other hand, the woman's name Junia is quite common in Greek. But the name was translated as a man's name time after time because no modern translator of the Bible into English was willing to believe that a woman could be prominent among the apostles and in Christ before Paul was. They read and translated what they believed was there rather than what was.

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Jesus' parables get similar treatment, probably from the earliest times. When there is a parable about a landowner or a master or a farmer or a father, you can be sure that this person in the story is God, and that we are going to get a straightforward version of how God would act in a particular situation. So, when we tell the parable of the prodigal son, we know that God is the father, and we are the younger son, or maybe the older son, and we learn about God's forgiveness and rejoicing at our return to the fold. When the landowner gives his servants talents to invest while he is away, we know that this is really about God who gives us many talents that we are supposed to use wisely and make them increase. When we read of the farmer whose field has grown to wheat and to tares, and who will separate the good from the bad at the harvest, we know it is God's field and that we are the good and bad things that God will separate in God's good time.

The formula is universal it seems. And so, from the earliest times, this morning's parable has been curious. Even Luke himself seems not quite sure what to do with it.

You have the normal scene set. You have the rich landowner, that would be God, and you have an irresponsible, squandering manager, that would be us, again. As expected, the landowner calls the manager to account: "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." There we are, in trouble, as usual.

But now the parable takes a turn. The irresponsible manager says to himself, I'm in real trouble here. I'm fired, that's for sure. I won't have any wages. The landowner isn't going to take care of me anymore. Well, if he's not going to take care of me, I better make some other friends fast. I know what I'll do. I'll go to all the accounts I handle and give them terrific discounts on their bills.

So he did. You owe a hundred; make it fifty. You over there, you owe a hundred, make it eighty. He cut them 20%, even 50%. He says to himself, Now these "people may welcome me into their homes." Now, these people are indebted to me. They will like me. I've got if not a golden, at least a silver parachute.

The story concludes: ⁸ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

The story, especially its ending, has had a lot of people doing mental gymnastics trying to make sense out of it. Some interpreters have said, surely what the manager did wasn't dishonest. The discount was his cut, his commission, which he deducted from the bill to show the master he was willing to sacrifice and turn over a new leaf. That interpretation doesn't work very well, though, since even the

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text itself says the master rewarded him because the manager was shrewd, and still dishonest.

Others have thought that perhaps the point of the parable was that the kingdom of God values shrewdness more than we thought. These interpreters have thought the parable argues against simple goodness. That's why the master commends the fire sale, they say. Look out; that's a slippery slope indeed.

Luke himself puts the parable in his Gospel and then adds the impenetrable conclusion, "If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?" So let me get this straight. If you show your talent by being good at dishonesty, God will surely see you have great potential in the Kingdom. Another slippery slope, I should think.

The story doesn't need all these gyrations to make sense. The dishonest manager got caught in his dishonesty. Since he was fired anyway, he decided to make friends with some more dishonesty. As his last act working for the master he doctored the receivables and let people get away with far less than they owed. Whew, he thought to himself, at least I'll have some friends to rely on now that I'm out of work. The story could be a story about our own time. It's the story of a man who gets caught in dishonesty, but who shrewdly uses further dishonesty to get out of the fix. How many people does that describe. Quite a few, don't you think?

But here the parable turns to irony, to putting its tongue in its cheek. It says the master commends the dishonest manager because of his shrewdness. And then it offers what is meant to be a preposterous, an eye-opening, a bring you to your senses conclusion. It says, You go ahead and make sure to make friends with dishonest wealth. You go ahead and be sure to use shrewdness and dishonesty, because when all that dishonest wealth is gone, all those people will welcome you into their eternal homes.

Right. Sure. It's meant to bring you up short. What will happen when all the dishonest wealth is gone? You can bet those dishonest friends you made with it will be, too. And then a double irony: their eternal homes; they'll welcome you into their eternal homes? You bet. First, we see that their friendship endures only as long as the money holds out. And then, of course, their homes bear no resemblance to God's eternal home in the first place. They offer no real or durable asylum. The parable means to say, you go ahead and be shrewd, you go ahead and be dishonest, but the money and the friends and the good times will all vanish like a drifting smoke, and you will be lost in a wilderness, miles away from any eternal home. We will have gone in the very opposite direction of our hope and our promise.

The parable means to bring us up short, to make us realize that we can fool ourselves all we want, we can manipulate things all we want, we can be shrewd all we want, but soon enough it will all fall like a house of cards, for we will sought a house with no substance, an abode with no durability, and a path with no promise.

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It has been a dangerous thing that translators have forced their view that there were no women apostles onto the text with impossible translations of Romans. It is equally dangerous that people have misinterpreted this parable we have this morning and felt forced to redeem some aspect of shrewdness and dishonesty in the process.

In this morning's other passage, from Jeremiah, we hear the lament of a people who have trusted in shrewdness and dishonesty: ¹⁸ My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. ¹⁹ Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her? ²⁰ The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. ...²² Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?

This lament can be avoided. The harvest can be glorious. There can be a balm in Gilead. There can be a balm right here in Gilead, right here in Cambridge. It requires but setting aside dishonesty. It requires but setting aside shrewdness. It requires but setting aside our belief that these things will get us what we want. It requires but understanding that our true refuge is found in their opposites. Our true refuge is found in honesty. Our true refuge is found in ingenuousness. Our true refuge is found in open-heartedness. And our true refuge is found in integrity. These are they keys to the home God has for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.