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Collusion and collision in ordinary life

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Text: **Luke 16:1–13**

Upon first reading today's gospel, I bemoaned my fate. At that point I wasn't ready to credit divine grace with assigning me such a text! The more I read Luke's story of the unjust steward, the more confused I became, and so I abandoned myself to the commentaries. And I was soon rewarded for my diligence. Historically speaking, everyone else has been just as disconcerted as I was.

In his meditations on our text, St. Jerome quotes a contemporary proverb: "A rich man is either a scoundrel or a scoundrel's heir."[2] St. Augustine felt moved to state: "we possess that which is another's when we possess anything that is superfluous."[3] Another commentator refers us, for enlightenment, to the twenty-seventh chapter of Ecclesiasticus: "As a nail sticks fast between the joinings of the stones, so does sin stick close between buying and selling."[4] Cajetan notes that "owls see better in the dark than do creatures of the day".[5] And, finally, various allegorical and typological interpretations have assigned the character of the sneaky steward both to Christ and to the devil.[6]

In the face of such theological disarray, not to mention the generally bleak view of human nature and society that seeps through these commentaries,[7] I was driven into the twentieth century and into the text once again. Form study. Parables. I noted that scholarly studies sometimes 'glossed' over the sneaky steward, or considered him separately. Parable study was, however, helpful: it let me off the hook, for parables are not to be interpreted![8] Mistakes had been made in

the past. Ancient authorities were liable to go off on tangents with this parable because they treated it as a simile. The rich man, the steward, the indebted renters of land, all were 'like' some individual or group. One common interpretive theme held that each character was a picture of some corrupt ecclesiastical system[9] which, of course, Christians, children of the light, were not to emulate. Dualism, the 'us' 'them' mentality. This kind of interpretation deadens a parable, and 'oughts' and 'shoulds' us to death too. Instead, parables are metaphor, and the questions that revived me account for the tension and mystery and freshness of today's gospel. A is not *like* B. Rather, A *is* B, and we find ourselves slip-sliding into the parable asking "Who am I?"

Jesus' story is about collusion and collision. And by virtue of who we are today, persons preparing for or actively engaged in the ministry of Christ, we are 'in cahoots' with the rich men, the slippery accountants, and the harassed renters of our world. Jesus took this world seriously. It is not a simple economic or political hierarchy that we need destroy, to establish peace and justice. St. Luke was not off base when he commented, "You cannot be the slave both of God and of money."

This seminary is planted square in the midst of a money system. So are our parishes, our people, you and I. And the pain, and cynicism, and disillusionment that lay us flat are the result of our deep and unrecognized collusion with the world we live in, even *as* we think we are about the business of bringing light into darkness. Split loyalties—the collision of God's claim on us with the claim of a monied world—all of this causes internal injury to the servants of Christ. And when we retreat to bind up the wounds, we may find ourselves needing to blame some person or an ecclesiastical structure for our pain and confusion. We are once again confronted with the wrenching question "Who am I?" Can I minister to others when I feel torn and bruised myself? Why do my fellow children of light shock and hurt me? And yet I find myself returning to this sanctuary for repair. To Jesus, who tells us truth about the world we follow him into. We are too much immersed in this world to see it clearly on our own.

There was a wealthy woman who owned several large farms and processing plants. She lived in the city and had a business manager, an accountant, to look after everything. One of

her friends mentioned that he had recently fired this person for sloppy investment practices, so the woman checked around and found that her manager wasn't doing as well as he should for her interests. She called him in and terminated his contract. This was perfectly reasonable. When the goal of the system is profit, not making the most one can is both disloyal and subversive, if not morally suspect. Now the manager was keeping a double set of books, skimming and dealing here and there, which is also reasonable enough if no one is hurt and everyone remains in happy collusion. Just in case the woman's auditor wouldn't turn a blind eye, the manager had a plan. He met with each of the woman's creditors, and set the official books straight. Then he paid off the creditors, slipping in a little extra out of his own velvet-lined pocket, thereby setting them up for blackmail in case someone did something foolish. With all his tracks covered, the manager presented his accounts. Meanwhile, the woman had discovered a few under-the-table loans, and deferred payments, and other irregularities, but he had made suitable adjustments. She chuckled at his ingenuity as she said goodbye, knowing he'd find employment with one or another of her creditors. She couldn't trust him, but how could she not admire him? After all, there were no split loyalties here. Everyone was after money, and the system allowed a certain amount of tinkering to that end. It would have cost her more than it was worth to convict him of fraud or embezzlement, and she would have appeared foolish, not in control of her holdings. She imagined the headlines: 'Financial scandal at the top' or 'Incompetent upper management'. At this point the 'trickle-down' theory of economics works. Frightened investors pull out fast, shaking the whole financial ladder, and the woman knew those on the bottom rung were most likely to fall off.

Who is innocent? The renters, the creditors, the middlemen, the duped rich person? All are on the take, all in collusion, and scrupulous honesty on the part of any one of the characters in the story would have been disloyal, subversive and painful to all exposed.

This is the world that Jesus submitted to, and draws us into. Though we are constantly seduced by the subtle dishonesties of all the systems we belong to, and though we often place our loyalties in the wrong persons or institutions through ignorance or naivete or desire for security, our vocation is to take

the profound depths of human life, and human sin seriously, beginning with ourselves. We cannot avoid our world, and we cannot avoid judgment. When we are most comfortable in the church, and in the world, the prophet Amos is ready to remind us of God's word: "Never will I forget a single thing you have done."

Perhaps St. Luke had the radical surgery of God's judgment in mind when he said, "The man who can be trusted in little things can be trusted in great: the man who is dishonest in little things will be dishonest in great." Who am I, and who are we as a seminary community, if not those called to be radically honest and trustworthy for the people of God? And if we cannot be trusted to handle wisely the money the church must use in the world, who will trust us with genuine riches, the hearts and minds of the rich men and women, the accountants, and the poor we are to care for? And if we cannot be trusted with persons and systems we don't own, who will give us what *is* our very own?

Sallie Teselle says,

> There is no escape from the task of thinking with the blood, of being, humbling as it is, 'a body that thinks', the human metaphor. A theology that takes its cues from the parables has no other course than to accept what may appear to be severe limitations—limitations imposed by never leaving behind the ordinary, the physical, and the historical. But these limitations are the glory of parabolic, metaphoric movement, for they declare that human life in all its complex everydayness will not be discarded, but that it is precisely the familiar world we love and despair of saving that is on the way to being redeemed. The central Christian affirmation, the belief that somehow or other God was in and with Jesus of Nazareth, is the ground of our hope that the ordinary is the way to the extraordinary.[10]

Ordinary world, ordinary bread, ordinary wine becomes extraordinarily the body and blood of Jesus Christ, recreating a community of servants of God, telling us who we are.[11] Amen.

Notes

1 Preached in Keffer Chapel, WLS, 24 September 1986, and slightly revised for publication.

2 Trench, Richard Chenevix, Archbishop, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1915). In reference to Luke 16:12, see p. 447, Footnote 3.

[3] Ibid. 449, Footnote 1. The quotation comes from Augustine's comments on Psalm 68.

[4] Ibid. 448, Footnote 3. Trench refers us to Ecclesiasticus 27:2 as a comparison with Cajetan's interpretation of Luke 16:12.

[5] Ibid. 445, Footnote 1. A direct quote from Cajetan. Trench himself notes on p. 429 that Cajetan gave up trying to interpret this parable.

[6] Ibid. 437, Footnote 1. Trench quotes Gaudentius, Bishop of Brescia, and a contemporary of St. Ambrose. J. Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (N.Y.: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1966), interestingly, does not mention the parable of the unjust steward in his section on allegorization of parables.

[7] Trench, *Notes* 446–447. "For the early Church writers the parable is often no more than an exhortation to liberal almsgiving." In support, he cites Irenaeus, Augustine, Athanasius, and later, Erasmus, and Luther, who said, "It is a sermon on good works, and especially against avarice, that men abuse not wealth, but therewith help poor and needy people."

[8] Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables*. Jeremias does interpret this parable (he limits its meaning to verse 8a), but he is not interested so much in detailed explanation, or in moral or ethical applications, as in the eschatological momentum parables offer to the Christian. He concludes, "Jesus, in fact, not only proclaimed the parables' message; he lived it and embodied it in his own person" (180). Further, "In our attempt to recover the original significance of the parables, one thing above all becomes evident: all Jesus' parables compel his hearers to define their attitude toward his person and mission. For they are all full of 'the secret of the Kingdom of God' (Mark 4:11)" (181).

[9] Trench, *Notes* 433, Footnote 1. Trench says Anselm "sees in the steward only an unfaithful ruler in the Church". Later, Trench notes that Vitringa, of the Cocceian school, interprets the parable of the unjust steward as follows: "The rich man is God, the steward the ecclesiastical rulers of the Jewish people" (436).

[10] Sallie Teselle, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 180–181.

[11] Ibid. 56–57. "Metaphor is, for human beings, what instinctual groping is for the rest of the universe—the power of getting from here to there. We use what we have, who we are, where we are to grope toward what we dimly feel, think, and envision we might have, who we might be."