

Sermon Title “Consequences?”  
Sunday September 18, 2022  
Kirk of St James  
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At our house we have been having a lot of conversations about consequences. For example, there are the standard warnings, “if you don’t go to bed you are going to wake up tired and grumpy tomorrow.” “Don’t jump on the couch you could fall off and get hurt.” There are things I was told growing up that I never thought I would repeat but, I was wrong—like “don’t cross your eyes or they are going to stay that way.” Then there are the extreme warnings like “I have to go mom, Grayson just walked by the door with a garden hose.” No matter the situation, whether serious, funny or in between we are trying to demonstrate that actions lead to consequences. It is a tough thing to convey and there are certainly a lot of nuances. So, whenever the lectionary reading of the shrewd manager rolls around again I feel like throwing my hands in the air because actions and consequences matter—until they don’t!

This passage is one of the most problematic passages in the gospels and it actually may not sound familiar to us for that reason--because it is easier to skip over it entirely rather than acknowledge it. Almost every commentary I read offered a different interpretation of it. Was he a shrewd manager? A dishonest manager? One scholar even described him as Robin Hood, robbing the rich to give to the poor. (That last one honestly really is a stretch). There is no way around it, this is an uncomfortable scripture because everything we think we know about Jesus and his teaching gets turned on its head. Then not only does Jesus commend the shrewd/dishonest manager for his work, he also exhorts us to do likewise. What is going on in the book of Luke this morning, and what does it mean for us today?

As one writer stated "Our story today is a parable, and the strength of a parable when it is used as a mode of teaching is that it is the people's story. It is a grassroots lesson connecting

the ordinariness of life with the extraordinary nature of God." Parables use images from our daily life that are familiar and offer us a window into what God intends for our lives. This is one of the few parables in the gospel that appears to go against the majority of Jesus' teachings, and people's understanding of the world. The people who were listening to Jesus' teaching were familiar with rich land owners, dishonest managers, and being in debt. They were used to Jesus subverting cultural norms, and putting those who were selfish or dishonest in their place--they were not used to being told to be more like these people. If we were completely honest this is exactly the type of person we want to see get put in their place!

Unfortunately, the shyster in our story is not corrected, in fact he triumphs! Not only does he triumph, we are then told this guy gets it, and us believers? We don't. This is one of three stories in Luke that talk about a "how much more" comparison. The first one occurs a couple chapters earlier when Jesus is talking about a man who went to his neighbours late at night and woke him up to get food so he can feed unexpected company. Even though the neighbour is unhappy he does in fact give the man food because of his persistence. "How much more" Jesus then asks "will the heavenly Father give to those who ask Him?" Later in Luke 18 the unjust judge helps a widow not because he cares about her well being, or doing the right thing, but simply because she persists in bothering him until he helps her (just to get her off his case) and then Jesus asks "how much more will God bring about justice..." So this story does have other parallels in the gospel, just none quite this confusing.

One of the most important things to note in this parable is that the manager redeemed whatever he could about his present situation. He looked at the mess he was in, and figured out a way to move forward in the best way he could. "Dishonest or not, this man understood how to use what was entrusted to him to serve a larger goal. Believers take note. How much more then,

must the children of God understand the riches entrusted to their care?" In the three "how much more parables" one of the key problems that people appear to be facing is that they have forgotten how powerful God is, and how much he loves us. If we truly grasped this truth we would not need these parables. One commentator wrote "Solomon wrote in his proverbs: "where there is no vision, the people perish. The parable of the manager speaks especially to Christians or communities who have lost the vision of the larger picture. Who are the people of God? What have they been called to do? When we have no idea where we are going, the treasures in front of us are hardly treasures at all; they are simply things, things that have no larger value beyond my own need for them. These things too easily become objects to be used, misused and manipulated."

After reading through this passage and the two other "how much more" passages in Luke (Luke 11:5-13 and Luke 18:1-8) this passage makes more sense. I don't believe that Jesus is saying "Look at this manager who was being really dishonest, and then does an even more dishonest thing, and then Jesus has the nerve to say "be like this guy." I believe Jesus is saying "We don't always make the best of our resources, in fact sometimes we squander them, we make unwise decisions, but that is not the end. Take what you have, be creative, dream, be persistent, and work to fix your problems, don't give up." The message of these three parables is "Be persistent in prayer and believe that God can do anything." I think it takes a shocking story like the one in Luke today to remind us of the radical nature of God, and to rock us out of the ruts we get into!

While I was writing this sermon I thought "I feel like I have preached this before" I mean if I am feeling it, you guys are probably thinking "oh no, not again!" But if you are anything like me I forget all too quickly the promises of God. I forget what he can do. When

that happens I begin to find myself mired in hopelessness. I knock a couple times on my neighbour's door and then shrug my shoulders and say "he must not be home" and I walk away and my guests go hungry. I pray and sort of hope God will hear me, but I don't live like he will answer. I read a wonderful quote the other day that said "Somewhere in the middle of our journey we stopped living for Christ. We stopped believing that Jesus died and was resurrected and that life was made new. Somewhere along the way it became easy to serve all those pressing demands: of people, of schedule, of money. Somewhere along the way God's call became muddled. We stopped hearing God's voice and joined the crazy survivor-takes-all mentality. Somewhere along the way, the challenges seemed so much bigger than the answers. So we huddled in an effort to save whatever was left and forgot about living for something greater. We buried our treasures."

I believe there is a lot of truth in that last statement, and I think a passage like we read today reminds us that "yes, sometimes we get off track" but that is okay because God is always willing to help us get back on track. If a shrewd business manager can turn around an impossible situation, how much more can God do? This week perhaps the challenge for all of us--me included would be to ask ourselves "What does it mean to persist in prayer, and to believe that God can do anything?" What would it look like to uncover our treasure and use it to its fullest measure? I don't mean that in a monetary sense but, if we were to uncover the gifts and abilities we have in our lives and not be afraid to share them with others what would our lives and communities look like? I believe the possibilities are endless!