

Ordinary Time 25C - 2019

When Shrewdness Wins the Day

Dan Miller in his book *No More Dreaded Mondays* tells a delightful story about a farmer many years ago in a village in India who had the misfortune of owing a large sum of money to the village moneylender. The old and ugly moneylender fancied the farmer's beautiful daughter, so he proposed a bargain. He would forgive the farmer's debt if he could marry the farmer's daughter.

Both the farmer and his daughter were horrified by the proposal, but the cunning moneylender suggested that they let providence decide the matter. He told them that he would put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty money bag. The girl would have to reach in and pick one pebble from the bag. If she picked the black pebble, she would become his wife and her father's debt would be forgiven. If she picked the white pebble, she need not marry him and her father's debt would still be forgiven. If she refused to pick a pebble, her father would be thrown into jail until the debt was paid. They were standing on a pebble-strewn path in the farmer's field. As they talked, the moneylender bent over to pick up two pebbles. The sharp-eyed girl noticed that he had picked up two black pebbles and put them into the bag. He then asked the girl to pick a pebble. Now, imagine that you were the girl standing in the field. What would you have done? If you had to advise her, what would you have told her?

Careful analysis would produce three possibilities: (1) the girl could refuse to take a pebble--but her father would then be thrown in jail. (2) The girl could pick a black pebble and sacrifice herself in order to save her father from debt and imprisonment. Or (3) the girl could pull out both black pebbles in the bag, expose the moneylender as a cheat, and likely incite his immediate revenge.

Here is what the girl did.

She put her hand into the money bag and drew out a pebble. Without looking at it, she fumbled and let it fall onto the pebble-strewn path, where it immediately became lost among all the other pebbles. "Oh, how clumsy of me," she said. "But never mind, if you look into the bag for the one that is

left, you will be able to tell which pebble I picked." Since the remaining pebble was black, it would have to be assumed that she had picked the white one. And since the moneylender dared not admit his dishonesty, the girl would have changed what seemed an impossible situation into an extremely advantageous one.

Don't we all love stories where the good guy uses his or her wit and cunning to defeat a villain? It may disturb us when a villain uses that same wit and cunning. And yet Jesus once told his disciples a parable about a dishonest man who did just that.

(by Dan Miller from *No More Dreaded Mondays*, Broadway Books. Adapted by King Duncan)

The currency of our culture

Tom Long says in a Baccalaureate service from 2006 and printed in *A Journal for Preachers* in 2007: "A better translation (for 'dishonest wealth') would be 'the money of this unrighteous age.' In other words, it is not the money that is corrupt; it's the culture that is corrupt, and Jesus is not talking about dishonest money versus good money. He is talking about all money, every last penny of the currency of our culture. Jesus wants us to take all of the money we have and 'make friends for ourselves with it.'" Then Long says, make all the money you can - shrewd advice "unless this world, with all of its glittering empires, is passing away... What is a new world, God's very own world, is being born? ... Then the shrewd among us would invest what we have not in this world but in the world to come."

The End of the Value of Money

In his book, *How to Preach a Parable*, Eugene Lowry says that in order to understand a parable we must look for the itch before we can feel the scratch. We must sense the tension before we can receive relief from the tension. We must place ourselves in the puzzling setting before we can see the resolution to the puzzle. Lowry calls this "finding the focus of the story."

All this talk about participation and finding the focus notwithstanding, what do we do with the steward who is a rascal, making deals with shady debtors and a master who commends the shrewdness of his steward for the deals he makes? What's the sharp point Jesus is trying to make?

The sharp point of this parable is that the master commends the use of money for people, instead of for pride, power, position, and possessions. In

other words, the value of money and possession comes to a dead end when we die. The sharp point of this parable is that money and possessions will do us no good when we arrive at eternity and face the judgment of God.

[by Ron Lavin from *Sermons for Sundays After Pentecost (Middle Third): Only the Lonely*, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.]

Like Running a Business

There was an interesting legal question posed in *The Saturday Evening Post* recently. It seems that one lovely Sunday when the sermon was overlong, the congregation rushed, as usual, from its pews on the first syllable of "Amen!" Faithful Abigail, the only worshiper held entranced by the sermon, moved slowly and was trampled. She sued the church and its officials for damages.

"Those in charge of the church knew that most of the congregation stampedes after long sermons," Abigail argued. "They should have recognized the danger in the situation. Not being prepared to cope with it, they were negligent."

The church's attorney argued like this in response: "A church is a nonprofit organization manned for the most part by volunteers. No one has a right to expect it to be run with the smart efficiency of a business concern. Abigail, therefore, has no real claim."

If you were the judge, asks the writer, would you award damages to Abigail?

What I found interesting in this hypothetical situation was the characterization of the church. "A church is a nonprofit organization manned for the most part by volunteers. . . No one has a right to expect it to be run with the smart efficiency of a business. . . ."

Why not? What if we were as good at what we do as McDonald's is at what they do, or Coca Cola or Microsoft? What if we were as committed to spreading the good news of the kingdom of God as American business is to winning new customers? This is the point Jesus is trying to make. He wants people who bear his name to not only be nice people but to be people who make a difference in the world.

(by King Duncan from *Collected Sermons*, www.eSermons.com)