

MAKE FRIENDS FOR YOURSELVES

A sermon preached the 18th of September 2016 at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr. Based on Luke 16: 1 – 13.

*Who is like the Lord our God, who sits enthroned on high
but stoops to behold the heavens and the earth?*

*He takes up the weak out of the dust
and lifts up the poor from the ashes.*

Psalm 113: 5 – 6

Jesus told parables. His disciples didn't like them. "Why are you teaching in parables?" they said to him. "No one can understand them! Even *we* don't get them!" I'll come back to this later.

He didn't teach this way early in his ministry. He began telling parables after Herod executed John the Baptist, the one Jesus called "the greatest man who ever lived." From that point on, Mark tells us, "Jesus did not say anything to them without using a parable." Israel didn't want to hear from God so God had given her what was wanted, the silent treatment, for nearly five hundred years. And finally, God was speaking again through his prophet John and his execution rocked Jesus' world! So he made things not easier but harder to understand.

The evangelist Matthew tells us, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus's parables, they knew he was talking about them and they looked for a way to arrest him." So the parables of Jesus are different from fables in one hair-raising detail: Aesop told his tales and nobody killed him for telling them. Jesus spoke in parables. And Jesus was put to death.

The parable of the dishonest manager overturns our assumptions about everything. Of course it does. In his parables Jesus appeals to corrupt characters to praise some aspect of their behavior. The unjust judge who grants justice to a persistent widow. God is like that unjust judge. The thief who surprises people in the night. God is like a thief. The strong man who must be bound before his house can be plundered. God again. The father asked by his self-absorbed sons for his share of the inheritance, the father wished dead, gives the boy what he wants. God is that prodigal father. Jesus says things we never expect him to say. Jesus says things, the kind of things you'd never expect

a rabbi to say — and, in our hearing anyway, he says them in church!

The manager in today's parable is a crook. The master knows it and is about to sack the manager for it, but announces an audit anyway. And that gives the manager time. The manager devises a scheme to endear himself to his master's debtors by cooking the books in their favor. He has them change their bills at his master's expense and he thereby feathers his nest. And the master commends the manager for acting shrewdly.

The master cares more for the crook than the losses he suffers because of him. That shouldn't astonish us. The God of Moses and Mary loves us the only way left to him, at tremendous cost to himself.

The dishonest manager is praised because he does whatever he can think of to raise his own prospects. If he has the cunning to feather his nest for the coming judgment how much more should Jesus's own disciples use anything at hand to get some future with their master?

This parable is strange because we think Jesus came to teach us how to avoid getting lost when we're lost already, experts at it. This is one of the differences between us and God. We assume God wants us to get stuck in our past failures whereas what the Most High is really interested in, what moves God's blood, is what we are going to do from now on. Each of us is going to give an accounting of what we do with our lives. Pay little mind to what you did before and more to what you do now with the time left to you. How will we use what we've got in ways that pursue a future with the one master worth talking about?

I have a friend who lives in the far country called Orange County. His name is Andy. I want you to remember him. He is a wealthy man. He really enjoys having a good time, and he's generous. He gives a lot of money to his church and to other worthy causes such as the work of my wife's brother Dr. Russell White, the chief of surgery at Tenwek Hospital in Kenya.

We sat in his backyard drinking a sturdy cabernet a few years ago. I'd heard he'd written a sizable check to help fund a residence for the Kenyan medical students Russ and other physicians train to be excellent surgeons, so I thanked him. And this is what he said. "Don't thank me. You know the parable of the dishonest manager, the guy who made friends with unrighteous mammon? *I'm that guy!* Of all the people in the Bible I see myself in, I see myself most in him! God in his favor has given me more than I ever imagined. I don't want you to thank me. I want you to *remember* me! When the Lord comes and the party's getting started I really don't think I'll be there. But I assume you will be there. I assume Russ will be there. So when the music starts and you guys are heading into the party and I'm not there, remember me and say, "Hey, where's Andy! What about Andy!" And maybe Jesus will say, "Andy? Okay. Gabriel, go get him and bring him here!" "That's what I'm doing," my friend said. "I am making friends with unrighteous mammon."

I said I'd come back to the disciples. It's time. A couple of Sundays ago I mentioned *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. I conclude with a few sentences from it.

The scene is a classroom at Gravesend Academy, a thinly-veiled Philips Exeter where the author of the novel, John Irving, went to school. The narrator of the story is Johnny Wheelwright, Owen's best friend who, like Owen, is a townie. The teacher is the Rev'd Lewis Merrill. Owen is extraordinarily little for his age and he has a wrecked voice so that he always sounds as if he's speaking in uppercase.

And in our Scripture class, Owen said, "IT'S TRUE THAT THE DISCIPLES ARE STUPID — THEY NEVER UNDERSTAND WHAT JESUS MEANS, THEY'RE A BUNCH OF BUNGLERS, THEY DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD AS MUCH AS THEY WANT TO BELIEVE, AND THEY EVEN BETRAY JESUS. THE POINT IS, GOD DOESN'T LOVE US BECAUSE WE'RE SMART OR BECAUSE WE'RE GOOD. WE'RE STUPID AND WE'RE BAD AND GOD LOVES US ANYWAY — JESUS ALREADY TOLD THE DUMB-SHIT DISCIPLES WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN. "THE SON OF MAN WILL BE DELIVERED INTO THE HANDS OF MEN, AND THEY WILL KILL HIM . . ." REMEMBER? THAT WAS IN MARK, RIGHT?"

"Yes, but let's not say "dumb-shit disciples" in class, Owen," Mr. Merrill said.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.