

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

The Dishonest Manager

July 17, 2011

**Psalm 139:1-12 and Luke 16:1-13
(Hymns – 420, 637, 625, 648)**

What was called forth from me this week,
what was provoked in my reflections on this parable,
was the challenge of loyalties and idolatries.
What is **THE** core loyalty in life for a follower of Jesus Christ?
What is the deepest value that is not negotiable?
What is worth more than anything else in the world?

And the question that naturally follows those ones is
what difference does that loyalty/value/worth
make in the way we live our lives?

I think the example and teachings of Jesus,
and the way they draw our attention
to the true meaning of the rest of the Scriptures,
are pretty clear.
The core loyalty, the deepest value, the greatest worth
for human beings
is God's relationship with them.
Everything else in life flows from that core reality.
Without a conscious, intentional, disciplined, and engaged
relationship with God,
our lives are out of alignment, painful, conflicted, and ineffective.

In the Christian experience of flourishing in that relationship,
God comes to us offering reconciliation in Jesus Christ
and continues to work to restore, retain, and strengthen that relationship
through the inner work of the Holy Spirit.

This whole dynamic of flourishing in relationship with God
in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit
is initiated and sustained by God's unshakeable love
for his human creatures.

What draws us into this relationship
is the attraction of that love
as the ultimate source and sustenance of our deepest desires and aspirations.
In the Christian faith, we find our hopes for flourishing fulfilled by God's love.

But what has all of this to do with the parable that we read this morning?

Frankly, I'm not sure.

And I'm not alone.

The commentaries on this parable are varied and confused.

So, I've chosen to focus my reflections this morning
on the challenging advice offered by Jesus in the final verse –
you cannot flourish when you are trying to serve two masters:
be faithful to God and his kingdom.

Any other ultimate loyalty in our lives is idolatry.

If we see wealth, power, popularity, safety, or knowledge
as the deepest value in our lives,
as the thing that has the greatest worth to us,
then we are out of alignment with God's way and God's kingdom.
Our response to God's loving offer of reconciliation
is distorted and dis-eased.

I think the best way to read the actual story
in our Scripture text this morning
is ironically.

It's a story told in a tone of sarcastic humour
to make the point that
while the kind of shrewd dishonesty
practiced by both master and manager
may be common,
but it is not the way the people of God would manage their wealth.
It is irrational by the kingdom's standards.
You can't serve money in this way
and serve God at the same time.

Nor can you be primarily loyal to the other idolatries of our age
and serve God as he desires.

If power, popularity, safety, or knowledge
are more important to you
that being consciously with God
in service God's kingdom,
then you still have some work to do
to mature into the mind of Christ.

It's important as we grow in our experience of the Christian faith
that we continually pay attention to this issue of loyalty and idolatry.

What attachments are driving our actions?
Are we making the things that God has given
to enable/empower/equip us to bless the world
goods rather than tools?

Throughout the testimony of the Scriptures
to God's power and purpose,
we run across the constant refrain
that God desires that our deepest love be focused on him.
This God, revealed in Jesus Christ as Redeemer,
knows that we will reach our full potential to flourish
only in a loving, loyal relationship with him,
through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I invite you to pay particular attention
to the words of the hymns we've chosen this morning.
They speak powerfully to what this loving loyalty means for us.

Frances Ridley Havergal wrote hymns, poems, and short essays
throughout the 1850s, 60s, and 70s in England.
Her best known hymn is the one we will sing this morning.
She sings of God taking our lives, our hands,
our voices, our wealth, our intellects,
our wills, our hearts, and our loves –
every power that we have –
and use them as *God* chooses,
in service to the kingdom.

Karen Lafferty is a Christian musician who lives in Santa Fe, NM.
She is the founder of Musicians for Missions International.
The ideas of seeking, asking, and knocking,
all in order to experience more deeply
the sources of flourishing life that proceeds from God,
lie at the centre of her popular hymn 'Seek ye first.'

We close our worship this morning
with the upbeat African-American spiritual
'I'm gonna live so God can use me.'
That just about says it all, doesn't it.
Live, work, pray, and sing
in order to stay in touch with the loving God
who saved us and sustains us for meaningful lives
everywhere, all the time.

We flourish in God's grace for God's kingdom.
That's the key to being fully human.