

Sermon – Accounting for the Grace in our life

Most commentaries or sermons about today's gospel, either begin with or quickly make the point that it is just a strange and difficult text. And I have to agree, it is.

It doesn't make sense. A dishonest employee is commended by his boss! That's not how we want the world to be. That's not what we teach our children. That's not what we expect Jesus to say or encourage. So, I want to begin somewhere else. I want to begin with something that, while not necessarily easier, is a bit more understandable and familiar.

"Give me an accounting of your management," the master said to his manager. We've all heard those words. It may not have been those exact words but at some time in our life, probably many times, an accounting has been demanded.

Did you ever get called to the principal's office?

The boss says he or she wants to see you in their office.

You come home and your spouse speaks those four dreaded words, "We need to talk."

In all those situations, an accounting of our management is being demanded. It's not easy. Giving an accounting can be an uncomfortable and even a fearful time. We review our words and actions wondering, "What have I done? What have I left undone? What will happen to me? What will I do?"

No one likes to have to give an accounting. We're pretty private about our personal financial affairs. Not only do we not want others to see the balance, sometimes we do not want to see the balance. We do not want to face and deal with that reality. But that's what this accounting asks of us.

You see the accounting demanded of this manager, just like the ones demanded of us, is really an accounting of his life. It asks us to open the

books of our life and examine, audit, what we are doing with our life and who we are serving. It raises important questions. What are we doing with the resources, assets, and gifts entrusted to us?

Think about all we have. Time, money, ideas, dreams, hopes, passions and concerns. Questions and curiosities. What if we were to give an accounting of our management of these? What would our books look like? What do they reveal about us? Where, how, in what ways, on whom are we spending and investing these assets?

These aren't just questions to be answered individually. There is also a communal or corporate accounting of our management to be given. What would it look like for Canada to account for its management? What about globally and internationally? What do the world's books say about humanity?

At every level people are trying to serve two masters. And it just doesn't work. The devastation and tragedies of not just our community, but our province, our country and our world. Something has got to change.

Today's gospel calls us to account for our management of all that we are and all that we have. The demand for an accounting often sounds like someone is in trouble. That's how today's parable begins. The manager has been charged with squandering his master's property. He going to be fired. He will lose his job, income, reputation, and status. A part of him is dying. At some level he will lose his life as he now knows it.

Whether we've lived it, heard it from a friend or colleague, or read it in the news, it's a familiar story. Somebody has been bad. They've been caught. Now they're going to get what they deserve. That's how the world works. That's what we expect. But that's not how the kingdom of God works and parables rarely give us what we expect. So, we ought not be too quick to come to a final or definitive interpretation of this parable. We cannot with ease or confidence declare who, if any one, each character represents:

God, Jesus, or us. The parable offers uncertainty and tension, not a neat resolution and that feels a lot like real life.

Maybe this story in general and the manager in particular is simply a picture of that uncertainty and tension. It is a picture that probably looks very familiar to most of us, a picture of the tension and uncertainty in our own lives, struggles, and decisions. There is even some uncertainty in labeling this man as the “dishonest manager.” What does that mean, the “dishonest manager?”

Maybe the label of dishonest isn’t what we think it is. Maybe it is less a declaration about the manager and more a description of his relationship to his master.

First, we have no details of what this man did or did not do to be charged with squandering and to be fired or whether the charges are even valid.

Second, while the word that is translated as “dishonest” can refer to a particular action or wrongdoing it can also mean the quality of unrighteousness. In that sense the manager’s relationship with his master is not right. It’s broken, impaired, out of sync. Perhaps the manager has chosen self-interest, self-loyalty, and self-serving over interest in, loyalty to, and service of his master. That can happen quickly and easily to any of us.

This manager then is the face and image for Jesus’s words, “You cannot serve two masters.”

Since we don’t know a lot about this guy or what he did maybe we can shift our focus a bit. Instead of trying to audit his books maybe we ought to examine our own books. Instead of being shocked that this “dishonest manager” is commended maybe we can see precedent, hope, and possibilities for our own commendation. The accounting that should have been the manager’s ruin became the starting point for a new life, new relationships, and a new home. Grace was hiding in the demand for an accounting, waiting to be discovered and claimed. The accounting

demand of this manager was both an ending and a new beginning, a death and a resurrection.

While the master may have wanted an audit of past numbers and transactions the manager saw that his old life was empty, bankrupt. New life would be seen only by looking forward. New life would be found only by being and doing things differently. The manager claimed for himself the grace hidden in his master's demand for an accounting, and he was commended. If the "dishonest manager" can be commended, why not me? Why not you?

Here's a crazy idea. What if the accounting asked of us is never complete, the books are never closed and the bottom line is never tallied, until there is new life, until there is a commendation? What if the accounting is not about finding wrongdoing but new life? What if it's about grace rather than punishment? That certainly changes our usual understanding of an accounting but isn't that what parables are supposed to do? They change the way we see and understand. If a parable makes sense, we've probably missed the point.

The accounting of our management isn't about numbers, wrongdoing, or punishment but about helping us see and orient our lives in a new direction. It opens us to new possibilities. It points us to our eternal home.

"Give me an accounting of your management." What are you doing with your life? Who are you serving? Amen