

For The Sake of Others

September 23, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Just when we think we've caught the gist of Jesus' many parables and their application to our lives of work and relationships, money and values, the parable of the *commended rascal* pops up in the Lectionary readings.

We've seen how Jesus preferred to hang around with *sinners* through the course of his ministry, and now he gives his disciples an enigmatic parable that almost seems more a joke, a humorous and pointed story that cleverly mocks the system, *and*, as a sub-text, explains how one can beat it.

A house steward was a person who, in today's corporate jargon, would be labeled a *middle manager*. In this exasperating story, the steward is on the verge of discharge by his wealthy superior because, through waste, neglect and pilfering, he has squandered the assets of the business he had been delegated to run. When asked to produce an audit, the clever steward

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guesses that the ax is about to fall and quickly decides to make some friends among his employer's tenants.

One obvious conclusion is that the man was a crook who, to use a common expression of today, *cooked* his master's books, *and* when judgment day arrived, cheated his boss still more by cutting the payments owed him. A kinder reading suggests that the steward, when judgment time comes subtracts out his commission from the creditors, which makes them very happy. Such a deal would make him shrewd, but not dishonest.

Still another viewpoint is that the steward, being a righteous guy, knocks off the interest that has accrued on the master's receipts. Since the Law of Moses prohibited the charging of any interest (Ex. 22:25), the steward was right to forgive it, which put his boss in a good light and pleased the debtors no end.

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A *concluding* perspective is that the debtors did not know *anything* of the manager's shenanigans with his absentee owner, or that he had been fired, but, nevertheless, praised the rich man for his impromptu discount. In turn, the rich man commended the steward for his actions, although through clenched teeth.

One by one, the steward calls the tenants who farm the land for a fixed fee. He *benevolently* allows them to discount what they owe by as much as 50%: half off, not a bad deal. The manager shows that, although he may be incompetent, he is certainly no fool when it comes to saving his own skin. Not a bad deal, actually. The landlord's tenants end up better off; the landlord gets what he would have received, without the commission, anyway and the steward/manager has had to develop contacts that can keep him out of ditches and off the streets. He prepares for a future he can live with.

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On the other hand, God makes clear to Moses and the Hebrew people on Sinai, *You shall not steal* (Ex.20:15). And so we listen to the outcome of Jesus' story expecting a major league conviction for the dishonest manager. But then comes more than an *unexpected twist* on the story. The master does not call the police; does not call the DA, his accountant, or the Better Business Bureau to blackball the steward from ever doing business there again. He *praises* him; he *lauds* him for his foresighted action whether or not he repents and makes amends for his unprincipled behavior.

Confusing, isn't it? What's going on here? What does Jesus seem to be saying? *Pious people can become so spiritual that they are of no earthly use.* They can set out to avoid *sinning* to such a degree that they never get around to doing much good for anyone else. As they try, in effect, to be more spiritual than God, the

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world, which God loves, reaps no benefit from their *savedness*.

What good is virtue if sought for its own sake? Self-glory? Self honor? Self-goodness? Jesus is not personally interested in these goals, as if he believed they could be attained (Mk. 10:17-18). Virtue needs to be spent *for the sake of others*. Sanctity for self alone has an unpleasant odor about it.

The Kingdom person Jesus lauds is not *perfect*. He or she is not simply someone who keeps a 4.0 moral average with God. The Kingdom person is not a *perfectionist* but an *entrepreneur*. The person who is radically open to God's working through her or him in all sorts and conditions of ways is, at the same time, fully in touch with the ways of the world outside. Such a person sees opportunity, the convergence of Gospel love and worldly need, when it comes along, and then pursues it with *realness*: *real* gladness and *real*

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singleness of heart and, yes, *real* imperfection. Most *saints* exist in fairy tales and in myth, often revised and edited. Maybe that is where they should stay. On this side of the grave, we need to live by grace and our wits. To live with the confidence that God is somehow working through us, even in our mistakes, sets the Christian free to soar. Even in the tawdriness of our moral instability and wayward ways, God's providential grace is occurring. *That* is the affirmation of a faith that means something, not only to God, but also to the world.

Where is this faith lived? It's lived mostly in the small things of life, in the day-to-day world. Most of us this week will not write a book, end a war, dine with a queen or make a cabinet appointment. More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of water, write a note, visit a nursing home, teach a Sunday School class, share a meal, tell a child a story,

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go to choir practice. *Whoever*, he said, *is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much* (Lk. 16:10).

AMEN