

20C 2022

The gospel passage today is considered one of the more problematic ones to interpret, but I think it need not be.

The difficulty seems to hinge on a confusion between the literal and metaphorical meanings of the text.

This is a persistent problem within the gospels.

Jesus frequently speaks metaphorically, in parables, but is understood literally.

When asked why he uses metaphor, he explains, “The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.” (Matthew 13)

In other words, he does this so that those who would like to twist his message to their own ends, like the literalist Pharisees, will be too confused to do so.

They will walk away more confused than when they arrived.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, however, to keep people from coopting and misusing one’s message, and in trying to do so, Jesus often confounded those he wanted to enlighten.

Even his disciples often take him literally and misunderstand the message entirely.

In the case of the dishonest manager, however, those confused about the literal and metaphorical meaning are not those within the gospel, but those reading it.

In this parable, Jesus begins by indicating how shrewdly the children of this age deal with one another.

The rich man fires his manager, who then cheats the rich man by reducing the amount that others owe him in order to insure that the manager will have a place in the good graces of the debtors.

Despite being cheated, the master, equally a child of the age, cannot help but admire the shrewdness of the manager.

He envies the manager's guile.

This is how people of the world deal with "their own generation," that is, with other worldly people.

They admire wealth and shrewd ways of obtaining it just as people today admire shady investments, suspicious bankruptcies, and offshore accounts and other tax dodges.

Through this parable, Jesus contrasts the dishonest outlook of the children of this age with that of the children of light, that is, with those who follow the way.

Though the children of light are more honest, he laments that they are nevertheless far less eagerly engaged in their pursuits.

As Jesus puts it, "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."

Jesus encourages us to be as diligent in pursuing our *eternal* homes as are worldly people in pursuing their earthly estates by working eagerly to make friends, to build relationships.

When Jesus says, “make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth,” in other words, he means to be as eager in making friends with other children of light as are those children of the world who make friends with other children of the world.

In that way, those relationships will endure beyond this life.

If we succeed, we will be far less anxious about earthly things.

Nothing reduces anxiety, in other words, more than a sense of profound connection with other people.

People may tell you beautiful stories about simply turning your worries over to God, which is an important step, but in my experience, this is insufficient.

When Jesus was stressed about his impending crucifixion, he said trustingly to God, “Not my will, but yours be done,” but he also chastized his disciples for making him feel alone.

“Could you not stay awake with me for one hour?”

Much of our anxiety comes from a sense of isolation that can only be mended by relationship.

Although our relationships and any wisdom we have gained are the only things we carry into the next world, people nevertheless sacrifice relationships, give up trust in order to secure temporary, worldly gains.

The shrewd manager made “friends” with his former employer’s debtors, but those friendships were based on personal gain.

As long as he is useful to them, or at least as long as he is not a burden, they will remain “friends.”

As soon as he asks them to help him to move, however, he will discover the limits of those friendships.

I remember when I was living in Los Angeles and helped a couple shift apartments. They did not have the standard grad student amount of furniture, but lived in a fully furnished two bedroom apartment.

I continued to help until the job was complete, which took two days.

Later, when I was moving to Japan, I sold a lot of things, and the remaining things I either gave to my apartment-mate, who was moving to a new apartment, or prepared to take in my car to High Point.

Those things and my personal belongings needed to be moved to my friend’s new place, where I was going to rest a few days before loading my car and driving to North Carolina to await my flight to Tokyo.

This same couple helped move all of my apartment-mate's things, and then decided they wanted to go to the movies.

They not only went, but they enticed the other people who were helping to go with them. My things (which was most of the furniture) remained in the old apartment, and I moved them with the help of my apartment-mate alone.

We may be surrounded by others, but if we do not have people in our lives who understand and appreciate us, a sense of vulnerability creeps in that increases our anxiety.

Jesus encourages us to build the kind of relationships that will last not only in this world, but into the next, friends who will welcome us into our eternal homes.

This is why Jesus repeatedly reminds us of the importance of such things as integrity (of not being a hypocrite, the sin he most frequently decried).

Integrity is not an end in itself, that is, but is a necessary step to building stronger relationships.

He knows both that it is worthwhile and that it requires a great deal of effort to succeed in building such relationships, which is why he encourages us to be diligent in their pursuit.

It is not easy to find such friends.

It requires two people who are both committed to being themselves and who are willing to drop their guard sufficiently to get to know one another at a deep level.

And not all such people will find themselves compatible.

Two perfectly honest, sincere people may discover that their paths are simply too distinct to allow for a meaningful friendship.

I hope you have been or will be able to find meaningful and lasting relationships, people who would even help you move and who one day will welcome you to your eternal home.

This is one reason we gather together in the church with others who are committed to integrity and the way of love.